



THE DUKE'S CLUB TRILOGY

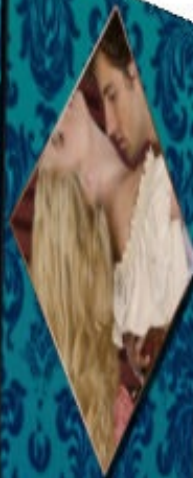
ONCE UPON A DUKE
DREAMING OF THE DUKE
WISH UPON A DUKE

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EVA DEVON

ONCE UPON A DUKE

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By
Eva Devon

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the work of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

The Duke's Club Trilogy

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ONCE UPON A DUKE

A DUKE'S CLUB NOVEL

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BARD PRODUCTIONS

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Once Upon A Duke

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For more information: evadevonaauthor@gmail.com

For my son.

The Joy you bring me is beyond words.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest thanks to Lindsey, Carol, Theresa, Delilah, Jenn, Kati, and Erin.

Without you all this adventure wouldn't be possible.

CHAPTER I

London

*I*t is an accepted fact that a young widow, even a decidedly proper one, should not—absolutely not—knock on an infamous bachelor’s door. For such shocking action might result in the permanent eviction of said young widow from the society of all but Yorkshire shepherders. Even so, Kathryn Darrell had decided that an entire life already spent rustivating in the country was significant reason to cause the largest scandal the Season had ever seen and she was going to do it with more panache than any other lady who’d launched herself into sin. So, without allowing herself to think twice, she lifted her chin and rapped on the door of Number Six Belgrave Square.

Kate drew in a slow, calming breath. She had every right to feel uneasy. Spending months planning her own debauchery was one thing; executing it was quite another. She resisted the urge to glance back at her footman, Gregory, who waited with the coach. Instead, she kept her gaze firmly upon the dark blue door. The particularly brawny servant would only be a shout away if she needed.

While she intended to be bold, she was no fool. She’d more than enough experience with foolishness. And everything was running in perfect accordance to her plans. Plans she’d been forming for months. She’d set an appointment under the anonymous name of one Mr. Braithwait. Fortunately, nothing interfered with her scheduled drive to the appointment. Now, she was about to set sights on the handsome butler who would lead her up to his far more handsome master. She would finally step into a world distant from unkindness and castigation.

Footsteps echoed on the other side of the door. She stared at the beautifully carved double blue doors as if she could see who was on the other side.

A shattering crash echoed somewhere overhead, and just as she looked up to the first floor, the door swung open, exposing a tall rectangle of candle glow and the silhouette of a squat man.

Kate jerked her gaze back to the butler in the doorway and blinked. Handsome the man was not. Crusty. It was the only word that came to mind.

He peered at her silently. Tufts of his eyebrows jutted out over his myopic blue eyes. He blinked.

Kate waited, hoping to God he would say something. She doubted the words ‘I’ve come to bed your master’ would gain her admittance into the house, and suddenly she found that her lips were rather reluctant to carry out her plan. Kate mustered her most winning grin, the grin she used to coax rectors, stubborn sheep herders, and too tightly laced curmudgeons of both the male and female variety. “I’ve come to see His Grace.”

The butler coughed lightly, bringing his gloved hand to his lips. “No.”

Kate pulled back her chin before she could stick it too far forward, a terrible habit she’d never broken. “No, sir?”

“No, miss.”

“But—” Well, what a dratted nuisance! Couldn’t the fellow just let her in? What possible excuse could she give to gain admittance to the abode of her impending debauchment? “But I have an appointment!”

He eyed her up and down and sniffed. “Do you indeed?”

Kate nodded emphatically. “Braithwait.”

The butler stared blankly at her. “Mr. Braithwait?”

“Err.” She couldn’t exactly make a private appointment for a woman, now could she? “Why, yes.”

“I guarantee you are not a Mister and even if you were—” A thundering crash cut the butler off. The old man sighed and wiped a hand over his wrinkled face.

Kate swung her gaze to the empty hall behind the old man. This was her chance!

Without thinking, Kate sucked in a breath and darted past the rickety man. If she was going to cause a bloody scandal, she might as well get on with the preliminaries and seize fate with both hands. . . or as the case might be, her fleet feet.

“Madam!” The butler shouted after her.

Kate kept running, her slippers sliding over the marble floor. A sense of panic and sheer glee at her cheekiness washed over her. She was breaking rules! More than she could count!

“Madam!”

Something yanked at Kate’s throat, bringing her to a quick halt. Her feet danced to keep her from falling.

She turned and spotted the butler with a fistful of her green cloak. She smiled waveringly at him, tempted to jerk the fabric away and make a mad dash for the sprawling marble stairs. But she was afraid if she did so, the old man would totter and splinter a hip.

The butler stuttered, his lips quivering. “Bugger it! Bl—” His fingers twitched around her cloak as he caught himself before uttering another foul oath. “Beg your pardon,” he wheezed.

After a few harrumphs, the butler narrowed his eyes and dropped the length of her cloak to the floor. “What on earth could warrant such a nice young lady as yourself to pretend to be a gentleman? And then fly into His Grace’s house like a filly on race day?”

Kate’s cheeks flushed, and her throat tightened. “I’ve a strong desire to make the duke’s acquaintance.”

“In private?”

Kate nibbled on her lip. Well, she was in for a penny she might as well go in for the pound. “Yes. . . In private.”

He shook his head, his white wig sliding slightly to the right. “Been reading the gossip sheets have you?”

She smiled tightly, hardly believing she was discussing this with the old man. Any of the elders in Shropshire would have keeled over at the very idea. “He is in the paper frequently,” she pointed out.

The butler snorted. “Blasted Snodgrass. Duke of Debauchery indeed. Codswallop.”

Kate laughed nervously. “If the gossip is true, I’d prefer you didn’t throw me out.”

The butler arched a shaggy brow and looked her up and down with a new degree of annoyance. “I see.” He gazed up at the frescoed ceiling and paused. His stiff shoulders, which were clad in green livery, relaxed. As if he could actually see something through the intricately painted ceiling, he murmured, “Perhaps you’ll do.”

Kate stared up, hoping for some illumination as to what she might do for, but the ceiling remained just that, a ceiling, and a decidedly suspicious feeling twisted up her already knotted stomach.

He strode in the calm manner of butlers to the curved stairs. “Follow me.”

Kate glanced back at the door, giving thought to the safety of her carriage and her footman. No. She’d come too far to turn tail and run now, but she

certainly hadn't envisioned the evening including such an odd interlude with the butler.

Oh, no. She had envisioned silks, velvets and a splendid entrance through the gateway of pleasure. This felt like an admittance to a house built for the batty.

Regardless, Kate turned on her heel and summoned a resolve which had been drummed into her since before she could tie her own laces. The same resolve which in the end landed her in a bad marriage. Still, she wasn't about to abandon it on the eve of untold rapture.

She followed the shuffling pace of the butler up the luxuriously carpeted staircase. Paintings of grand military exploits, some dating back to William the Bastard, hung upon the gold brocaded walls. The duke's town home was quiet elegance, and its beauty was definitely appealing.

When they reached the first landing, the butler turned down the hall to the right toward the earlier crashing.

The loud noise had diminished, but Kate couldn't ignore the fact that a rather deep voice was grumbling through the silk covered walls.

The grumbling turned into shouts as they walked slowly down the hall. She frowned. Had she somehow mistaken the address? The paper had never mentioned the duke kept a lunatic in his abode. Considering all she'd read of the carefree, wild, war hero she'd expected the epitome of decadence. Not shouting and crashing.

As they neared the end of the hall, the butler slowed. He eased his way up to the last door, stretched out his hand and hesitated. He glanced back over his shoulder and whispered, "You're certain?"

If her stomach had been a bit flighty before it turned positively riotous. Although now racked entirely by curiosity, she nodded sharply.

The butler knocked soundly. "Your Grace?"

There was a long pause then a voice straight out of the rumbling depths of Hell growled, "Sod off, Grieves."

The butler pressed his hand to his cravat.

Kate dug her fingertips into her palms. Had that been him? Truly? A terrifying and confusing thrill ran straight down her spine and lingered right between her thighs. How could a voice be so shocking?

The infamous Duke of Debauchery sounded like he might tear his door down to throttle his own butler for disturbing him. Then again, he did also sport the rather dangerous moniker Duke of Death for his military exploits and victories on the dueling field. From Snodgrass' tidbits, it seemed the man had a

predilection for defying death. Upon reflection, perhaps such information should have deterred her from popping into his abode.

“I have something for you,” the butler said calmly, though his voice was somewhat higher in tone than before.

Something? Kate shifted uncomfortably, still trying to ignore the headiness of the duke’s voice. What the deuce? She was not and never had been a something. For seven and twenty years, she’d plodded along, following her father’s rules and then her husband’s rules. Upon finally gaining her freedom from both, she’d decided to never follow such strictures again. Though, her Aunt Gemima had warned her about the untimely consequences of impulsive behavior. She’d scoffed then, but standing in the duke’s hallway, she was beginning to think the old girl might have been right.

“What something?” The duke’s voice was more of a rough purr now.

“A human sacrifice.”

A what? Kate jerked back, blinking at the sudden notion of herself tied to a pole for the delectation of the man behind the door.

“Of the female variety,” the butler glibly added.

“Well, then, send her in.” The voice was careless and hypnotic at once.

Kate patted her little bonnet as if the thing might keep her brain from tumbling out of her astonished head. She wasn’t sure how the evening had swerved so far from her imaginings, but on the positive side—if there was a positive side—she was about to meet the man she’d been dreaming about for weeks now. Now, one could only hope he didn’t turn out to be an utter nightmare.

The door swung open and the butler stepped aside.

She swallowed and stared at the open space.

“Don’t linger,” the duke barked. “Come in or get out.”

The direct challenge hung in the air like a gauntlet being thrown down between two knights, and Kate was never one to back down from a challenge. Squaring her shoulders, she nodded at the butler then stepped right through the doorway and towards her own highly anticipated damnation.



Ryder Blake, the eleventh Duke of Darkwell, didn’t even blink as his next morsel walked through the door. Instead, he lifted his cigar to his lips, ignored the books and a few Grecian urns he’d flung to the floor, and took a long pull.

He allowed the aromatic smoke to fill his mouth as he glanced over the latest variety in a long line of women who had come to him seeking sexual freedom.

This one was different. He didn't even need to look at her to know that. Usually, when he gave order to Grieves he was to remain undisturbed, the butler obeyed to the letter. Even if that meant no one was admitted to the house for days. Ryder blew out the smoke and the bad taste the thought gave him.

He had to admit there was nothing remarkable about her. Where some women were soufflés, she was a muffin. And from the firm line of her chin, perhaps a rather tart one.

Her bonnet, plain grey, perched on top of her blonde hair shadowed her pale skin and blue grey eyes. Though she had high cheekbones, her face lacked the elegance of nobility, and her lower lip was far too full. He dropped his gaze to her well-formed but average breasts and then down to her narrow waist. The curve of her hip was a mystery, hidden beneath the surprisingly small skirt given the fashion of the day.

Yes. She was average and in every way unremarkable except for the sheer determination and unmistakable intelligence glowing in her stormy eyes. A smile, a rarity for him, pulled at his lips. He had no doubt that those plain blue-grey eyes could riot into a tempest that would ignite the coldest of blood.

And she had come to him, the coldest of them all.

"So, my dear, you've come to the Duke of Debauchery, have you?" he drawled, giving her a mock bow, the smoke from his cigar swirling about his hand.

She frowned, a spark lighting her eyes. "When you put it like that, it certainly sounds..."

Lifting the cigar to his lips he drew in another long draw of the heady smoke, then tilted his head to the side, curious to see if she would prove to be just like the rest of the silly women who came to him. "Dramatic?" he asked, smoke whispering from his lips.

"Boring, actually." She shifted on her slippered feet and smiled ruefully. "I must confess I expected a more enticing introduction."

Ryder stared at her for a moment then laughed. The deep wave of sound started in his stomach and poured from his lips. "Well, good. At least you're not a soft bit of lace."

She smiled, even though her brows drew together in confusion. "That I am not."

“No sherry for you then?” He crossed to the gold and black sideboard table standing near the fire.

“Brandy.”

Ryder glanced back over his shoulder. She smiled at him. He nodded. “Certainly.”

The woman was clearly unlike any of the others who had come to him. Of that, he was now most certain. She had no guile or artifice, and he had the terrible feeling that if he asked her a question she would give him an honest, unguarded answer. This didn’t bode well for the evening. For the whole truth and honesty game was not for him. He much preferred the veil of lies that men and women wove to keep each other at a distance.

He grasped the cool decanter and poured the amber liquid into two crystal snifters. If she’d been one of the other wool-headed young women or bored wives, he would have sat and ordered her to come to him. She certainly didn’t meet his usual requirements, not having any of the self-obsession he usually preferred in the women he allowed into his bed. Self-obsessed women he found, never became obsessed. Thus, he could boot them out the door with a bauble and a smile.

But there was something raw and innocent about her that had more fire than the most practiced of women. He lowered his gaze to her left hand. No ring. Nor did there appear to be a line about the finger which might indicate its temporary removal for a romp in his bed.

She was of an age to be married at least a few years over and yet, she was not. Was she a virgin? As he lifted his gaze back to her face, he realized it didn’t matter. Whatever her experiences, though few he was certain, she was unguarded and unaccustomed to the ways of an affair.

Oddly, instead of observing him observing her, she was glancing about, taking in the room, her hands clasped calmly before her as if she hadn’t stepped into one of the most notorious houses in London. As if she hadn’t heard the earlier sounds of his fury or noticed all the books and vases strewn across the floor.

Ryder ground his teeth together as he avoided looking at her simple dress and plainly styled hair. She was so unlike the powdered and belaced tarts who came for a tumble. This one, whether she knew it or not, needed more than a tumble to awaken her body. She needed the one thing he never gave—a meeting of the minds.

Slipping his cigar between his lips, Ryder looked down at the two glasses and for a moment considered tossing the contents and sending her off. But tonight the darkness was pressing on him with renewed vigor, and for the first time in a long time he actually allowed himself to consider indulging in a bit of company to ease the pain.

Ryder cradled the snifters of brandy as he slowly approached her.

The young woman's eyes widened and her gaze traced over his face and then over his black clad shoulders, muscled from hours of boxing drills and fencing rounds. He smiled at her blatant but genuine innocence. He couldn't help it. His damn lips had curved of their own volition. He extended the snifter. She yanked her gaze from his chest, down to the brandy.

He waited for her fingers to stretch out.

It was the softest touch. Her gloves, plain cotton, brushed his skin. He allowed the moment to linger. The roughness of his hands brushed against the delicacy of hers. Her breasts lifted in a sharp breath, and that single movement sent the blood in his body shooting straight to his groin. He was used to it. Desire was part of his strange and empty existence. But when he met her eyes, his chest tightened with a sensation he hadn't felt in far too many years.

Ryder fought the sudden urge to jerk back. Not in fear, but because her eyes were full of invitation. Invitation to know her utterly. Completely. To his shock, he heard a part of himself he'd been certain was dead and gone, whisper for him to not only take it. To seize it.

CHAPTER 2

*W*ell, this was definitely intriguing.

Kate took the snifter and tossed the contents back in one swift move. Despite her determination, the fact that she was going to have sex with this lion of a man was suddenly a very compelling and mutually alarming realization. She stuck out her hand, the empty glass thrust towards him. “Another.”

His black brows lifted, and his sensual lips twitched with amusement. “Whatever the lady requires.”

Drawing in a steadying breath, Kate stared at his broad shoulders as he returned to the decanter. Goodness, he was something! The Duke of Darkwell, indeed. He certainly suited the name. From the black silk shirt that hugged his broad and muscular chest and shoulders to the black breeches and boots that encased his strapping legs, he was the picture of a dark knight. Even his hair was pitch black, and it brushed past his shoulders, feathering lightly about his forehead.

In fact, there was only one little bit of color to his dark wardrobe. A simple cream ribbon was tied around his wrist, bared by his slightly rolled, full sleeves. It was such an odd touch to him she was tempted to ask about it. But she was not here to inquire after his wardrobe.

So instead, Kate savored the scent of his cigar spicing the room. She drew in the sensuous aroma, wondering if his tongue would taste the way the cigar smelt. As if he knew what she was thinking about, he dashed it out in a porcelain dish and eyed her. Quickly, he tossed the contents of his own glass, perhaps not wanting the lady to feel alone in her hasty consumption of her beverage.

He took both glasses in one hand as he turned to her. “You’re new to London.”

A blush warmed her cheeks at his quick assumption. “Is it so obvious?”

He hesitated for a moment, and his dark eyes lingered on her face then trailed to her plain grey gown. “Yes.”

Shifting uncomfortably, Kate resisted the urge to smooth down her unfashionable skirts. Percy, bastard that he was, had spent thousands of pounds of her money on his own frippery. Clothes that had assisted him in the seduction

of countless women. And he'd insisted, no demanded, she dress as befitting a wealthy country wife. Her gowns had been atrociously expensive, yet surprisingly meant to deter the interest of other men. Percy had almost dressed her as if she was his doll.

Since his death, it had been an act of defiance to dress plainly. But perhaps her cousin Imogen had been right. It had been a mistake to come to him so attired. Maybe he didn't find her attractive in her simple clothes. And perhaps, such clothes weren't fitting for the games she now intended to play.

It was amusing really. For she could buy and sell every single shop on Bond Street, even after her husband had done all in his power to spend her money. "That will change."

"Will it?" he asked so softly, it sounded like regret deepened his voice.

Certain she was mistaken, she took a step forward, her slippers toes brushing the rich carpet. "I haven't come to London to sit idly."

"I see." His knowing eyes caught hers, and heat spiked down her spine.

Apparently, he had some idea as to what exactly she had come to accomplish. Which was good because now she wasn't exactly sure what to do in this little tryst. After all, being locked up in Shropshire was about as educational in sexual manners as a whap in the head with Aunt Gemima's fan.

"Just one moment." He paused by the table covered with liquor and pulled back his black sleeve, exposing a slender, ivory ribbon tied about his wrist more fully. Ever so gently, he tugged at the knot. The slip of fabric slid free, and he reverently laid it onto the silver tray housing the decanters.

Again, she was tempted to ask what it was, but as his strong fingers lingered over the thin strip of fabric, she felt as if she'd be invading something sacred.

Wordlessly, he turned and crossed to her. The air warmed, and Kate's breath came a little faster. Her plan was mad really, and his role in it the maddest part. But she desperately needed madness in her oh so practical life. Just once. Or if she were lucky, twice.

Kate licked her lips. "I'm rather eager to grow accustomed to London's ways."

He offered her the full glass, his broad shoulders blocking her view of the opulent room. "And you've come to me to help you . . . grow accustomed?"

She smiled tentatively. It was as if he had read her thoughts. He was the first true step in her quest. "Yes."

Staring down at her, his dark eyes glittered with intent and a spark of something hotter. "Why?"

The simplicity of his question was intimidating and fascinating. If he were frank, she would speak so in return. Still, the words lingered in her throat, and she had to take a quick sip of brandy before confessing. “I wish to finally know pleasure.” Lord alone knew Percy Caldwell had given her only enough intimacy to be declared her husband.

A soft laugh rumbled from the duke’s lips.

She frowned. “You think I jest?”

The Duke of Darkwell brushed her hand aside then lifted his own strong one to slide a curl back from her forehead. His fingers lingered at her temple and wound into the curls just behind her ear. “I believe you to be quite serious. Your being here, alone, in my room, makes me quite aware how you wish me to—how did you put it?” He gazed down at her through half closed eyes, “Pleasure you.”

Kate couldn’t stop herself from smiling, even as heat raced straight between her thighs.

“The real question is exactly how did you wish me to please you?”

She stilled under his touch. Was there more than one way? The possibility was thrilling. “Tell me my choices and I’ll tell you how I wish it.”

The duke’s dark brows drew together, and his eyes glowed with fascination. “You realize a husband could satisfy you without the ruination, darling?”

She was not about to explain and let talk of Percy destroy her perfect night. Once, she’d been foolish enough to believe a man could love her. She’d never make that mistake again. And she certainly would never give herself into another man’s control. She’d rather be dragged through London’s streets as a proclaimed harlot before becoming a man’s possession. All she sought now was to know pleasure.

She tilted her head into the cup of his hand and looked down at the amber liquid glowing like gold in her glass. “I wish to be free, something a wife could never truly be.”

“Ah. I see.” Though there was understanding in his voice, there was a slight sadness to it as well. “A woman of intelligence.”

Her gaze snapped up to his. Was he mocking her? But when her eyes met his, she saw utter candor. “You understand.”

“I understand the need to be your own person. And far be it for me to criticize your pursuit of sin. According to the scandal sheets, it is my primary reason for existence.”

The hint of bitterness was unmistakable in his dark eyes, and for some inexplicable reason, Kate felt the sudden urge to take this big man in her arms and comfort him as she had never been comforted. "It is not?" she asked gently.

Silence stretched out between them and for a moment, Kate could have sworn he was about to speak, but he dropped his hand from her cheek and gestured to her glass. "Come now, you are not here to hear me bare my soul. You are here because you have dreamt every night of a man's hard body against yours, his mouth on your breasts." He leaned towards her and whispered softly, "His fingers teasing your body into the heat of desire."

Kate gasped at the shocking words, but the excitement rushing through her was far more powerful than the shock. What he couldn't know was she had felt a man's touch, but it had been cold and unkind and meant to keep her in the proper place of a man's wife. Now, she wanted the caress of a man who cared for a woman's enjoyment.

Kate started to shake her head. Because at this moment, she longed to hear the serious words he had stopped himself from speaking. But he took her glass and set it and his upon the mantle. He clasped her hands in his and then very slowly, in the glow of the fire, he lowered his mouth to her fingertips and drew her gloves from her hands with his teeth.

The fabric glided against her, awakening her fingers, giving them life she'd never imagined possible in appendages meant for practical use. But apparently with the duke, even things meant for practical use were also meant for luxurious comforts.

As he tugged the remaining glove aside and let it fall to the India rug beneath their feet, he gently pulled her into the heat of his body. "You have dreamed of a man's kiss," he murmured. "Dreamt it upon your lips, upon your nipples, upon the soft folds of your sex."

Before she could offer untruthful protest at the images he was fanning to flame in her head, he leaned in and with feather light pressure kissed her temples. Her breath caught in her throat, and she could taste his spicy aroma; leather and the seductive scent of Spanish oranges. Just as she arched towards him, he brought his lips achingly close to hers, tempting her. She opened her mouth slightly, leaning closer, longing for him to seal the kiss.

Instead, he lifted his hand to her throat and tilted her head back. "What else have you longed for?" he whispered just before he planted an open-mouthed kiss to the soft skin. "Because I know what I wish," he said. "I wish to give you pleasure. Again and again."

Kate jumped at the exquisite sensation of his lips gently pressed against her and at the words he tempted her with. The soft heat of him was bliss, and she remained absolutely still, fixed with curiosity and the onslaught of ecstasy.

Her breasts rose and fell as liquid heat raced from his mouth, through her veins, and straight to the place between her thighs. His tongue brushed her skin and traced in a slow circle, then he lightly bit the sensitive spot.

Immediately, Kate's fingers wove into his dark hair, pulling him closer. Goodness, she was sinking into pleasure and drowning in too many clothes. Mindlessly, she reached up to her cloak, but he brushed her hand aside and gently tugged at the long green strings.

It whooshed to the floor, sliding along the plain fabric of her gown. The sound of it sent a shiver of anticipation running along her skin. In moments, her skirts too would be nothing more than a pile of burdensome linen on the floor.

She had no idea what she needed, but it was clear he did for he kissed the line of her throat and paused just as he neared her breasts. Kate arched her back towards him. His thick, but lush black hair tickled her skin as he very lightly licked the v of her breasts.

This was what she had wanted for so long. For years she'd been locked away, never knowing the slightest touch. Now, this man was thrusting her into a world of sensation. One she had always known existed but never taken part in, and she wanted to completely offer herself up to it.

He kissed the tops of her breasts and braced her sides with his hands, as if he knew her knees might buckle at this sudden, scandalous touch. Desire burned through her and her inhibitions faded under the persuasion of the brandy and the duke's skilled mouth. She let her head drop back and her bonnet tumbled to the floor.

At the soft thump of it landing, he lifted his head. His eyes, hooded with hunger, traced over her face. Wordlessly, he swept her up into his arms and carried her to the sapphire brocade settee just before the fire. Gently, he placed her down, reclining her against the embroidered pillows.

He knelt before her, a fascinating process of long limbs and muscles at work. Heavens, how she longed to see his body. Never once in her whole life had she seen a naked man. Anatomy books had been the closest thing, but here he was in the flesh. With a boldness that surprised herself, she took fistfuls of his silky shirt.

Barely pausing, he tugged the shirt from his black breeches and yanked it in one swift move over his head.

Kate gasped. The fire glow cast his body in bronze and every single muscle was highlighted by shadows. Her breath came fast as she drank in the sight. His nipples, darker than his skin tone, were taut, and his muscles. . . only in the sculptures in her father's gallery had she ever seen such hard evidence of a male's physical power.

The duke's black eyes burned like fired coals as he guided her hands to his bared chest. Kate's face burned at her own scandalous behavior and yet the desire pounding through her now and waking between her legs demanded she take whatever he offered.

Eyes widening with amazement, Kate let her hands wander over the hard hills and valleys. Slowly, she explored down to his breeches. He felt like silk over iron and impulsively, she lightly grazed her nails along his belly.

He drew in a sharp breath and clasped her hands with his. Kate drew back, sure she had done something wrong.

Slowly, he guided her hands to rest on his shoulders. "You were born to this, darling, but this is about your satisfaction. Not mine." His hands skimmed the hem of her gown. "Now, rest easy."

Kate stared down at him, her hands resting on the cool brocade of the settee. She wanted to reach out and grasp him again, but was certain she would break the spell if she did. So, she remained silent and allowed him to work his magic upon her.

Slipping his hands underneath her full skirts, he teased his fingers over her ankles. Her eyes flared wide, and as he slid his hands up her calves, pausing at her knees, her mouth fell open. Her heart slammed in her chest. Instinctively, she parted her thighs. Her cheeks flared with embarrassment, but a soft moan hummed from his throat and so, she parted them a little further.

The duke continued to raise his hands until he was barely touching her silk covered skin with his fingertips. Even so, the light touch seemed like consuming fire on her thighs as he moved past her garters, and her core was hungry for something she didn't truly understand.

When at last his fingers met the juncture of her thighs, she couldn't hold back the cry of astonishment as his thumb brushed the softest part of her folds. Her hips jerked up, and she strained towards him. A wolfish smile curved his lips, and ever so slowly, he circled his fingers over the tight little nub that was wet and pulsing for him.

Kate closed her eyes as sensation after sensation swept through her. Never in her entire life had she known anything like it. Her entire body felt like a tangled

knot ready to unravel. She panted then opened her eyes. The sight of him at her feet, his dark head slightly bowed as he concentrated on pleasing her? It was shocking, what with her skirts pushed up to her thighs.

He slid a strong finger inside her, never ceasing his teasing of her nub and she cried out.

“Yes,” he moaned. “Enjoy it.”

At the sound of his purring voice, her entire body tensed then pulsed again and again with bursting stars of ecstasy. She shook as his thumb circled relentlessly and his finger thrust deep inside. Her hands slid into his hair and pulled him to her.

He pressed his face to her breasts, warming them with long kisses. As the last bit of pleasure faded, she drew in a deep breath and couldn’t stop the smile from coming to her face. So, this was pleasure.

She didn’t know what to make of it except for the fact she liked it very much. Very, very much. How had she gone so many years without this kind of knowledge? Well, knowledge was the path to happiness they said, and she wanted as much happiness as he would give her.

Starting now.

CHAPTER 3

Among all the women Ryder seduced, and there had been many, none of them ever made him feel as if he was pulling an angel down from the night sky. Or perhaps it was worse. Perhaps it was she who was pulling him up from Hell, and he'd be damned before he pulled his firmly entrenched boots from Satan's playground. He'd earned his place there years ago, and he hadn't yet begun to pay for his sins.

Ryder rested his head gently against her soft breasts. God, she was beautiful. Certainly, not the beauty touted by the *ton*, but when she gasped with the pleasure he'd given her, her cheeks crested with color and her blue grey eyes raged with emotion.

And that. . . That was not acceptable. It was why he should have sent her away immediately. He and emotion were not allowed to mingle.

Ryder closed his eyes as he drew in her scent of cinnamon and roses, rubbing his face gently against her sex dampened skin. He could take her. It would be so simple, he'd push her back and slip her skirts up to her waist, take her sweet cunny into his mouth, and when she was slick with desire he'd take her.

But it felt wrong. He was not the man to give this young lady true what she desired. She deserved someone who would love her, who would lay down his life for her, who could give her more than just his body. She should give herself to a man who had the right to touch a bit of heaven. He was not that man.

After one last breath of her scent, Ryder leaned back and smoothed her skirts down her legs.

It took her a moment to meet his eyes, but she smiled, her eyes dazed and glowing with anticipation for more. "And now?"

She was not going to like his decision, but it was for the best. "Nothing. It is time for you to leave."

She blinked. "Pardon?"

Gently soothing her, he caressed her skirts. In truth, he was convincing himself to keep the damn gown down for his fingers itched to inch them back up. "You came for pleasure and received it. Now it's time for you to go."

Her spine snapped straight, and the smile faded from her face. “I don’t understand.”

Ryder leaned back onto his haunches and forced his hands to rest on his thighs. “How clear do you wish me to make it, darling? Go, for your own good.”

The satisfaction faded from her eyes, replaced by confusion. “But—”

He leveled her with a firm stare. He had to get her out of here before his resolve faded under the growing pressure at his groin. “No.”

“Why?” Consternation elevated the pitch of her voice. “Am I not attractive enough?”

Ryder almost smacked himself in the head. Of course, she’d think the worst of herself. He was handling this badly, but his cock was tight to his stomach, throbbing to be inside her.

“No. You’re. . .” He searched for the smooth words which always came so easily whenever soothing a piqued female. Yet none came. It was as if all his golden lies had.

She pushed his shoulders back and stood. “I see.” She started inching around him, as if afraid her gown might brush him.

“No.” He laughed ruefully. “I don’t think you do.”

Stopping just out of reach, she looked down on him. Her eyes crackled with frustration. “Well, what is it then?” she asked softly.

Ryder struggled for the words that would somehow make this easier for her. At last, he shrugged. “You are a lady.”

She moved forward her eyes searching his. “I don’t want to be a—”

“You should.” It was almost laughable. She wished to be a sinner but looked like a saint. That was except for the glow he’d given her.

“But—”

Ryder stood, forcing her to look up at him. “You don’t truly want to be like me or any of the people you’ve read about in the papers. We’re dark and cruel, and we care nothing for love or honesty.”

A smile curled her lips, only this time, it was cold and her grey eyes froze in to the stillness of the cold English Channel. “Nor do I, Your Grace. Nor do I.”

He blinked at that. She didn’t wish for love? This lovely little thing that looked as if she’d never known a painful day in her entire existence? But as he looked closer, he could not deny that under her brimming optimism there was just the familiar edge of pain.

Ryder took her small hand in his grasp. His fingers swallowed up the graceful whiteness. “You should wish it, and you should find it.”

Her smile warmed, but it was an amused grin as if it was she who was now laughing at him. Him, the bloody Duke of Darkwell.

She tilted her dark head. "In my experience, men proclaim love but do not ever truly feel it." Her smile tightened. "I think it is far better to mirror their approach to the relations between the sexes than to adhere to a woman's hopeful heart. Don't you?"

Ryder blinked, shocked by the sudden anger in her voice. How could he tell her she was completely in error. That men did love. That they could love so entirely it might burn them to a cinder when it was ripped from them. "I—"

She shook her head, her dark curls caressing her slender neck. "You say I should seek it, but do *you* seek love, Your Grace?"

Damn. The woman had him there. He'd known love once and had no plan on seeking it out ever again. "Touché."

"It isn't that you don't desire me, then? That you're sending me away?" she asked, gently lifting her hand and tracing it along his hard chest.

"Don't desire you?" Ryder took her hand and placed it on the hard shaft pushing at the front of his breeches. His cock twitched at the touch of her hand.

She gasped and pressed harder. "Let me stay," she whispered. "This once."

He shook his head and stepped back, away from her tempting touch. A woman like her, whether she was prepared to admit it or not, wanted more than just once. She deserved more too. Nor was she ready for the way London would take her goodness and shred it to ribbons. Maybe if she'd been harder, a little wiser to the ways of the world. But he would not be the one to cast her into the cruelty of London's sparkling sham as a woman to be used for a man's play thing.

"You will leave through the servant's entrance in one of the maid's cloaks."

"I will go out the way I came, thank you," she clipped. She looked up at him through eyes still hot with desire, and her lips curved into a wickedly dangerous smile as she placed her hand on his hip then slipped it down to his hard cock and slightly squeezed. "But you shall regret it. I should have liked to experience what other carnal delights we might share."

He smiled tightly and forced himself to take a step back. God, the woman was half way to being a temptress, but he wasn't going to lead her down that dangerous road. "It was a pleasure."

"Yes. It was." She gave a small curtsy then turned to the door. Her hand paused on the handle. She glanced back at him over her shoulder. "No need for goodbyes, I think. After all, we shall see each other again. Quite soon."

With that, she whisked out through the door.

Ryder stood in the center of the room, staring after her. He never even asked her name. For some ridiculous reason, the realization saddened him. That was completely preposterous. Hell, it didn't matter.

Slowly, he returned to the small black and gold table. He stared down at the pale ribbon then clasped it in his fingers. Instantly, Jane came to mind. A man could love so much he would never forget and never give his love to another woman again.

Yes. He'd done the right thing. He sent the angel out, and now, he'd let his own personal darkness back in, along with the loneliness of the night.

After all, he deserved to be in Hell. That's exactly where he would stay.



"There you are! Goodness, I've been waiting half the night!" Imogen Cavendish bounded down the front steps of their newly acquired town home overlooking Green Park. She grabbed Kate's hand.

Instantly, Kate started marching up the limestone stairs, passing their spritely butler, Forbes, certain her cousin was going to say something terribly indiscreet before they were able to get into the privacy of their home.

"And?" Imogen demanded as they crossed the threshold and into the circular foyer. Their slippers echoed on the black and white Italian marble. "Did the good duke give your tail a little tickle?"

Kate stepped back and nearly stumbled on her gown in her chagrin. She shot her cousin a warning glare. "The servants!"

"Pish! They know all in any case, why pretend?" Glancing back at Forbes who still stood by the doorway, Imogen gave him a naughty grin. "Don't they, Forbes?"

Forbes cleared his throat and bowed. "Indeed, they do, madam."

"You see?" Imogen took Kate's hand and tugged her along the hallway to the French salon. "Tea, Forbes!" she called over her shoulder.

Kate laughed. The woman was a breath of fresh air compared to the stodgy company she'd kept in the country. Like herself, Imogen was young and very wealthy. Best of all, they were both widows.

Neither of them had liked the idea of living alone, and having been friends since they were children in Shropshire, they decided to take up each other's company in London.

Imogen started to hum, at least a step off-key, and with remarkable gusto for one who sang like an alley cat. She didn't even stop once they were ensconced in the French Salon, the walls periwinkle and ivory striped silk. She and Imogen had chosen the tables, all French and painted to a glossy white embossed with pink roses, with more cheer than most married couples.

But tea. . . Tea meant a chat, and Imogen wouldn't let Kate go until the last sip was drunk or every secret spilled. And right now, she just wanted to patter up to her room without being examined as if she were a dastardly French spy.

Giving Kate's hand a squeeze, Imogen rushed around to the front of the pale blue watered silk settee and plunked them both down and waited. Her green eyes sparkled in her elfin face and her gold hair shone like copper in the firelight. The folds of her rose silk gown spilled out over the delicate settee and rustled over Kate's country gown. What was more, Imogen looked as if she was about to burst with excitement.

Kate nibbled her bottom lip.

Imogen leaned forward, still silent. No doubt wanting to know every detail, and yet Kate wasn't sure she wanted to elaborate on her experience. It had been bizarre in the extreme, though she wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. In fact, her mind was already racing with endless possibilities as to how she might meet the duke again.

"You liked him," Imogen said assuredly.

Just as Kate opened her mouth, the maid popped in with a laden tea tray. The girl set the heavy silver service down before them. An indiscreet smile curled the maid's lips, and she scampered out. Surely, servants weren't supposed to be so cheeky, but then again Kate, herself, wasn't really a model of female virtue.

"Well?" Imogen prodded, scooting even closer.

Kate studied the tea tray with fixed curiosity and began pouring the black liquid into a yellow china cup.

Imogen plucked up the delicate cup and proclaimed, "You did. You liked him. I can tell. You're cheeks are positively glowing!"

Kate snapped up a hand to her face. Indeed, her cheek was warm against her cool palm. A laugh bubbled from her throat. "It was. . ."

"*Amazing? Miraculous?*" Imogen shivered with delight. "Oh, the Duke of Darkwell! You know, I tried for him once myself. Apparently I wasn't to his taste. In the end it was his loss. You see—"

"Imogen," Kate cut in, taking up her own tea cup. For some reason, she didn't like the idea of Imogen fantasizing about him. And she wasn't about to

ponder why such an idea might agitate her.

“Of course, he is *your* duke, my dear, but the scandal sheets report him to be the most—”

“I know what the scandal sheets say.” And she did. Kate glanced back towards a stack of the rags she loved tucked away on the French table by the tall windows. In fact, she had stacks all over the house. They’d been her only entertainment through the long winter months alone in her sprawling country home.

Imogen nodded. “Of course. But you’re not quite as happy as I thought you’d be.” She narrowed her eyes. “Actually, I’d say you’re a trifle snippy.”

Kate shook her head, fighting back a smile. “I’m sorry, it’s just the evening didn’t go exactly as I planned.”

“Ah! Plans.” Imogen took a strawberry tart and plopped it on to her plate. She lifted her tea cup to her lips and sighed. “They seldom go as we desire, and sometimes it’s for the best.”

“Yes, but...” She wasn’t sure how to explain. “He sent me home.”

Imogen choked on a sip of tea. “Sent you home? But—But he is the rake of all rakes!”

“Exactly as I thought.” Taking a conciliatory drink of tea, Kate tried to sort out exactly how it happened. One moment he’d been caressing her and the next—well, the next he’d given her the boot.

Which made no sense because he undoubtedly desired her.

“It had to be the dress. I told you to wait. I said, ‘Kathryn, we shall buy you delicious new gowns and then you shall see him’. Did you listen to your dear cousin?” Imogen gestured towards Kate theatrically with her tart. “No. And now you have the consequences of never knowing what it would be like to—”

“It wasn’t the dress,” Kate cut in, knowing Imogen could go for ages. “Indeed, it wasn’t.”

Imogen frowned and took a bite of her tart. “Something did happen though.” She chewed, eyeing Kate with consideration. “I’m positive.”

Imogen *would* know. Unlike herself, Imogen had already had countless lovers. Her husband had been old and had just wanted a pretty girl to present to company. Also unlike herself, Imogen had never been foolish enough to believe a young man could ever love her just for herself. She was too schooled in the ways of the *ton*, having married at fifteen.

“Are you going to tell me or shall I have to bring out the rack? No, I have something far more cruel. I shall deny you strawberry tart.”

Kate glanced at the taunting strawberry tarts glistening with sugar and cream. Imogen could eat heaps and never worry about her figure. She, on the other hand, had only to look at the delicate little confections and had to go off on a bracing walk. “Hardly a punishment.”

Imogen rolled her green eyes. “Come now, you are purposefully avoiding the subject.”

Shifting on the settee, Kate drew in a breath. Imogen was her closest friend and her ultimate guide to scandal. Still. . . she’d never talked about such things, not with her mother and most certainly not to Percy. In fact, if she’d mentioned such things to him, he probably would have called her an un-virtuous wife. Even though he saw nothing hypocritical about splashing his name about with countless women of ill repute in the sheets.

“He commenced seducing me.” Kate lowered her voice to a hush. “It was divine. He touched me. Stroked my legs.”

Imogen glanced about the room. “I’m sorry, are you concerned about an audience?”

Kate sat back as she pinned Imogen with a dagger glare. “It’s all very well to you, but I’ve never done anything like this. You met Percy, you know what he was like.”

Percy had firmly believed a wife should be a paragon of modesty and not know the joys of the flesh. A mistress on the other hand, well apparently, she was perfectly qualified to be given care and satisfaction. Once, she’d seen him with one of his women, just outside the coaching inn leading to London. He’d kissed her quite in public, his hands roving over the woman. He hadn’t seemed to care about modesty at that moment.

“Silly is what that situation was. I don’t know how you ever thought of him as a potential lover, let alone a husband.”

Kate ground her teeth. Yes. Percy was a particular sore point. When she’d first met the russet haired gent, he’d been so charming, quoting Shakespeare and Dryden. He’d said he loved her and longed to cherish her. Much to her shame, she believed him.

“Kate?”

She smiled tightly, shoving Percy out of her head. “Pardon. Old ghosts. In any case, it was going splendidly.” Kate’s hands shook as she thought of the intensity she’d felt under the duke’s ministrations. “Oh, I never thought it could be so. . .” Percy had only ever climbed into bed with her, lifted her shift, parted

her thighs and prodded at her till he'd shook like a tree leaf and collapsed. All the while, touching her as little as possible.

"I'm glad you've finally known a bit of fun." Imogen patted her hand. "No one deserves it more. So then?"

"He simply told me to go and I should find someone to love me."

Imogen's mouth dropped open till she looked like the fish in the Serpentine. "What?" She demanded crassly. She put down her tea cup and wiped her hands together brushing away the crumbs. "Did you tell him who you were?"

Kate paused. She supposed it was a bit odd she hadn't said a word. But Percy Darrell had made their name quite infamous with his goings on. The last thing she wanted was to be thought of as *his* widow. "No."

Imogen lowered her chin. "What did you tell him?"

"I—Ah, . . ." Kate lifted her cup and mumbled into it, "I told him I wished for pleasure without a husband."

Imogen lifted her hand to her forehead in dramatic frustration. "My dear, whatever shall I do with you?"

"Now look here, Imogen, I know I'm a bit green, but really!"

"Green? Dearest, you're greener than a field in Ireland. And you let him think you were a virgin! Or at least a woman of no experience. No wonder he didn't make love to you. Virgins are far too much trouble."

Kate gaped, suddenly seeing her own idiocy. "So, if he had known I was a widow?"

"You would have been bedded till you thought nothing but bliss."

The fact she had been so close to actually bedding the duke was beyond irritating. She could only imagine how wonderful that would have been. "Blast."

"Blast, indeed." Imogen tapped her finger against her chin. "Do you still want him?"

The thought of the duke's strong hands on her thighs flashed through Kate's mind. Good lord, she longed for his touch even now. "Yes. And I have every intention of seeing him again."

"You mean you didn't botch it?"

"Absolutely not." Kate wiggled her eyebrows. "In fact, I know he desires me."

"How is it that you know? Did he tell you?"

Kate couldn't quite bring herself to tell Imogen about how he had taken her hand and placed it over his hard sex. It had been so strong and firm beneath her

grasp. “Trust me. I just have to find a way to convince him that his sense of honor is misplaced.”

Imogen leaned back, understanding brightening her face. “The seducer shall become the seduced?”

Laughing, Kate gave Imogen a little salute with her tea cup. “Let the seduction begin.”

CHAPTER 4

“Good god, man,” Jack Eversleigh, the Duke of Hunt, said over the din of practice blades clashing. “Are all the women in London in heat? I refuse to believe it’s just you that has them rapping on your door. And in the middle of the night.”

Ryder’s hand stilled on the hilt of his rapier. He snapped his gaze from the series of lined up dueling strips to Hunt. He had made friends with the man over ten years ago, and in that time he, Hunt and another duke, the Duke of Roth, had formed the Duke’s Club. A club where they could be themselves and never had to worry about sycophantic bowing and scraping. Equals in power, they could all be brutally honest with each other.

It had been an incredible relief to find two other dukes who had also lost their fathers at a young age. At present Roth was on the continent, but Hunt was always a good source of entertainment and could bring Ryder’s spirits up when they were lagging to a dangerous point.

Even so, there were times when he wished Hunt wasn’t so blastedly incorrigible. Ryder sighed. “The gossip wheel is well greased I see.”

“Your neighbors make a profession of watching your door.” Hunt yanked his bottle green coat off his broad shoulders. “I swear old Lady Trentham would wither away in boredom if it weren’t for your exploits. She made her rounds early this morning.”

“Damned old trout,” Ryder gritted. “The woman should spy for the king.”

Hunt inclined his head and grasped the hilt of his rapier, walking back along the dueling strip. Ryder followed him, his own rapier in hand. The soft leather surface of the strip was dull compared to the highly polished wood floor.

Ryder eyed Hunt. With his towering stance, black hair and icy eyes, the Duke of Hunt could stop a man at a hundred paces with one hard stare. Yet, it never surprised Ryder to hear the man had a good gossip with the ladies of the town. “So, where did you hear about it?”

“Mm. I heard it over tea with Mrs. Barton. Lovely woman, that.”

Ryder laughed dryly. The sound echoed through the hall, bouncing off the plain white walls. “Tea, my arse. I had no idea you paid such polite social calls

to the dear lady.”

Stretching out his arms wide in innocence, Hunt said, “Come now man, a gentleman such as myself would never besmirch a lady’s honor by referring to it so early in the day as anything other than tea.”

“And did she serve sweets?” Leaning back slightly and bending his knees, Ryder took his stance. He needed a good fight. He was tense from lack of sleep, and dreams. Dreams of soft blonde hair, pale skin and a guileless face. A face untouched by the hardness of this world.

“Let us say I shall be fasting for days. . .” Hunt flourished his rapier then propped his left hand on his hip. “Or at least a few hours.”

“You are a glutton.”

“I do believe you partake in a number of feasts yourself.”

Yes, he could eat night and day if that someone was a certain pale-haired young woman in a pale grey dress. Bloody hell, but he would love to feast on her. He’d start with her breasts, work his way down to her bottom and then, he’d spread her thighs and lick—

Blowing out a breath, Ryder advanced ready to let out his pent up frustration.

Thrusting forward, their blades clashed. Instantly, Hunt drove hard, his blade slicing through the air like lightning. Answering each strike, Ryder moved light upon his feet, controlling every parry then twisting right to riposte.

Hunt smiled as he retreated. “So, who is the bit of muslin?”

At the thought of the young woman, whose name he had intentionally not asked, Ryder hesitated, and Hunt’s blade sang forward, stopping an inch from his heart.

“A bit off, are we?”

Ryder backed off, tugged his linen shirt away from his throat then adjusted Jane’s ribbon about his wrist. “Certainly not.”

“Then what exactly do you call *that*?” Hunt’s dark brow arched skeptically.

Ryder shoved his hair from his face and resumed his stance. “Carelessness.”

“Not like you, old boy.”

Wordlessly, Ryder moved back in. He wasn’t about to admit that an hour in the presence of a country girl had shaken him. Especially not to Hunt. The man would never let up on the subject, and Ryder wanted this out of his head as quickly as possible. The only thing to do was change the subject and quickly. “How’s your brother?”

Hunt rolled his eyes. “We are talking about your woman.”

“I don’t have a woman,” he said tightly.

“Fine then. Charles is splendid. He’s off in India, no doubt risking his life, stealing into some harem.”

The Duke of Hunt’s twin brother Charles was one of their drinking companions and constantly required his brother’s motivational persuasion to keep him from drowning in gin and women. At least Ryder and Jack came up for air on occasion. The slightly younger man also owned the fencing club they were in at this very moment, proving that he wasn’t entirely frivolous. Still, the Eversleigh twins were the best bet in town for a very good outing.

Apparently, refusing to be distracted, Hunt struck fast.

Ryder snapped to attention, grabbing the upper hand, driving Hunt down the dueling strip. They moved back and forth seamlessly. The blades flashed and clanged as each tested the other. Few men matched Ryder’s skill with a blade, but Hunt was one of them. And he needed someone right now who could challenge him, make him work and get that damned woman out of his thoughts.

“So, the chit didn’t drain you dry?” Hunt spun in and raked his blade towards Ryder’s middle.

Ryder stumbled and dropped to one knee as the blade zinged past him. Why couldn’t Hunt drop the infuriating subject?

“Tripped, did you?” Hunt said brightly.

Ryder stood and wiped his linen sleeve over his sweating forehead. He planted the tip of his rapier into the leather strip and paused. “I sent her on her way, if you must know.”

Hunt blinked, as if he was absolutely mad. “I beg your pardon?”

“Have you gone deaf or do you enjoy hearing me repeat myself?” Ryder looked away for a moment then returned his gaze. “I sent her off.”

Hunt smirked. “Ugly was she?”

Ryder lifted his blade and pointed it at Hunt. “She was beautiful, actually. In a way I simply cannot—” He shrugged, not knowing how to put her attractions into words. She’d been captivating.

Hunt threw back his head and laughed. “Good god, man. You’re besotted. Who’d have thought it possible?”

Ryder lowered his rapier and paced to the bench lined against the wall. Sheathing the blade he made quick work of toweling himself with a piece of linen. He was not about to head down this line of conversation with Hunt. The man would be relentless, and Ryder was in no mood to convince him the woman just intrigued him and nothing more. “Don’t be absurd,” he barked over his shoulder.

Sauntering slowly towards him, Hunt's eyes sparkled with an annoying self-assurance. "A woman is the very font of absurdity, old man, and you seem to be knee deep. Now, no secrets. Why didn't you bed the little dear?"

Ryder was not going to let Hunt push him into a heated comment, even if the temptation to belt his friend in the face was building at an accelerating rate. Tugging his cravat around his neck a little too tightly, Ryder turned and said as calmly as he could, "She was too innocent for my tastes."

The mocking glint cooled a little from Hunt. "Oh. I see."

Though they had a number of differences, they had one main thing in common. Neither of them bedded overly innocents or virgins. It wasn't worth the risk of pregnancy or ruin of the girl, all over miscommunication. Inexperienced woman often believed sex meant something more than a good romp. And a good romp was all Ryder or Hunt were worth. Both, for their own reasons, had long sworn off marriage.

"But who was she?" Hunt tugged on his plain, but superbly cut emerald green waistcoat and jacket.

Ryder ran a hand through his long hair, pulling it back into a queue. If she hadn't been so interesting or so candid, if she hadn't made him want to spill his secrets and have a chance at happiness, he might have asked her name, but since she evoked such dangerous thoughts, he hoped never to have need of her name. "I don't know."

"You didn't ask her name?"

"No." Part of him was damn glad that he hadn't. There were enough people in London he might never see her again, and it was unlikely she could get an introduction into his set. "My butler claimed she was a Mr. Braithwait."

Hunt stared blankly.

Ryder shrugged. "I have no idea what that was about."

"So it's a mystery?"

Ryder nodded tightly.

"That's terrible, old man. Terrible," Hunt intoned with great seriousness. He shook his head.

"Why?"

Clasping Ryder's shoulder, Hunt looked him squarely in the eye. "Because you love a good mystery."

"Sod off." It wasn't a mystery if he deliberately didn't want to know her name. Indeed, it wasn't.

"My, she has put you in twist."

“Go to the devil,” he said flatly, hoping to put a firm lid on the topic.

“I’d rather go to the House of Lords. You are coming to vote?”

“Certainly.” Ryder was glad to change the subject. Once he got Hunt on the topic of reform, the man would never cease talking. Perhaps, it was his father’s murder which had given him such a sharp edge and passion for politics. “It’s the Catholic vote today, isn’t it?”

Hunt nodded his face grim. “I love my country, you know I do, but I’ll be damned if I’ll stand by while an entire group is kept from their rights.”

Ryder picked up his black over coat and quickly slung it over his shoulders. It seemed they each had their causes. Hunt wanted to change the world while Ryder simply wanted to get through it.



“You’ll never guess what I have!”

Kate looked up from *The Pickering Press* trying not to dwell on the fact she should probably be reading one of the more serious papers considering the shape of things in France. But really, she loved reading Snodgrass. The man was too amusing.

She laid the paper down beside her half-finished plate of bangers and toast. “What is it you have?”

Imogen bustled into the bright breakfast room, her pink skirts rustling. “An invitation to the Countess of Carmine’s private party.”

Kate paused. Try as she might, she couldn’t think why this should be so exciting. “And?”

Imogen let out a sigh and hurried over to Kate’s end of the breakfast table. “I know you read Snodgrass, and the man has mentioned the countess half a dozen times.”

The reality was when she read *The Pickering Press* the only name she sought out was Darkwell’s. “You can’t expect me to recall every scandal-ridden lady and lord in London. It would take me the rest of my life to commit them to memory.”

Imogen threw her hands up into the air. “She is only one of the most exclusive hostesses in London.”

Kate grinned. My, exclusive was quite nice. She whipped her napkin off her lap, plopped it on the table then pushed her chair back. “However did we get an invitation?”

Wiggling her brows, Imogen clapped her hands together as she closed the distance between them. “The countess and I have an understanding.”

After only a week in London, Kate already understood the nuances of *ton* life. Anyone could do anything as long as everything *appeared* to be proper. And she was certainly ready to begin doing everything. Kate leaned in as if they were sharing a dangerous secret.

Imogen placed a bejeweled hand on the linen covered table and leaned forward. “She invites me to her parties, and I don’t speak of the *ménage a trois* I came across last spring with the countess, her riding instructor. . . and her lady’s maid!”

Kate gasped. “Her what?” An image of three naked people in a straw and leather filled stable flashed through her head. She couldn’t help but wonder who’d done the riding and who had been ridden.

The famous countess riding her instructor brandishing her whip and shouting *tally ho!* came to Kate’s mind, and she had to bite back a laugh.

“Too scandalous for words, isn’t it? To look at the countess you’d think God himself had touch her with piety.”

“When is the party?”

“Tonight. So, we must find you a scrumptious frock. It’s no good having you look like a pigeon. Fine feathers are what you need, my friend.”

Pigeon, indeed. That was certainly not the impression Kate wished to give London. It was truly time to indulge in the most beautiful and perhaps scandalous frocks her money could buy. After all, there was no one to shout at her that she was dressed immodestly now. Kate grabbed hold of Imogen’s hand. “How am I to have a gown made so soon?”

Following her lead, Imogen rustled after her. “I suppose we could have one of my gowns made over, or perhaps Madame Sophie could produce something. She *is* the goddess of fabric.”

Kate smiled at her cousin as the onslaught of potential washed over her. She’d never owned anything grander than the gowns of her youth and then the modest and proper gowns Percy insisted upon. And she’d certainly never been to such a party. Deeming them to be preposterous displays of wealth, her father never even gave her a coming out. Now nothing was going to stop her from having more gowns than she could ever know what to do with.

But. . . There was something odd about this whole circumstance. Even she knew it was strange to be invited on the day of the event. “Isn’t this short notice?”

“The countess’ parties are very hush hush, you see? Hence she only sends out notice a few hours before.”

Kate laughed. “So, what occurs at the countess’ parties—”

Imogen waggled her brows. “Doesn’t ever leave them.”

Not long after, they were secure in an open carriage racing down to Bond Street. Kate leaned back against the blue velvet squabs and drank in the sunlight. Turning her head to the passersby, she couldn’t stop herself from smiling. In fact, her cheeks hurt with her happiness. A little over six months ago, she’d been trapped in a loveless marriage, and Percy, that dratted man, had been drinking his fill of London. Oh, but she was being cruel. He had bought her gifts. Books, in fact. Books on how to be an obedient wife, one who never questioned her husband’s authority.

Though it really had been too bad for Percy that he had died in a duel over another man’s wife, it meant she could now ride merrily through the park, on the way to spend a substantial portion of her own fortune.

This new world was a wonder to her, and she leaned forward, pulling the glass window down. A white carriage drove by. The women inside were dressed in peach and yellow silk, their hair curled and powdered. Two men in scarlet red coats rode just behind on great horses, swords glinting at their sides.

And the noise! Wheels clattered over the cobblestones. Children shrieked with laughter, their iron faced governesses calling after them. The side streets were packed with people, buying and selling. The cries of hawkers punctuated the air like some wild orchestra. In London, surely one could never be too sad.

Their carriage struggled through Bond Street and stopped in front of an elegant store with the words *Madame Sophie* embossed in gold letters above the glass and mahogany double doors.

The footman bounded down, unfolded the carriage step and held out his gloved hand. Imogen descended, her skirts in hand and lifted high above the strangely brownish yellow muck lining the London street. Kate followed catching sight of a shoe that someone had apparently abandoned in the quicksand-like substance.

Stepping onto the slightly smoother ground just before the shop, Kate gawked at the storefront. The glass windows shone, and the outer walls were pristine stone. Finally, she’d arrived.

“Now, my dear, don’t let your mouth hang open like that.”

Kate snapped her lips closed. Oh dear, she’d been gawking like a country mouse. But the windows! Gowns of pink and blue stood in the casings. Lace

dripped from them like sugared frosting, and the embroidery! Why it was as if the dresses were alive with flowers.

Regardless of their wealth, her father never encouraged extravagance in women, and Percy. . . well, he used as much as possible on himself. She'd dreamt of wearing gorgeous gowns, and now she was going to buy every blasted thing in the shop if she wished.

They entered the shop and were ensconced in elegant silence. The scent of roses and lavender wafted around them. Soft chairs of ivory and gold were positioned artfully about the room as were tables of white marble with gold legs.

A lovely young girl bustled towards them, her violet silk gown plain yet perfect on her slender frame. The girl smiled brightly, clearly anticipating a very worthwhile customer. "*Bonjour*, Lady Cavendish. A delight," she purred in a soft French accent. "As always."

"*Bonjour*," Imogen replied. Gesturing towards Kate, she said, "I have come for several gowns for my friend."

The young assistant turned from Imogen to Kate.

Much to Kate's surprise the shop girl's pale face lit with interest as she looked her up and down. After a moment, she smiled tilted the girl's pink lips. "*Oui*, madame!" She gestured towards Kate's middle. "May I?"

She nodded, curious as to what exactly had caused the young woman such gratification.

The girl's slender hands circled Kate's middle, and then she looked into Kate's face with fascinated dark eyes. "But madame, why have you hidden your beauty?"

Kate sputtered, unsure if she should feel flattered or insulted. "Men," she said flatly.

The girl tsked. "*Mais oui*. Men are so much trouble, yes?" She stepped back and clapped her hands. "We shall make your beauty shine. I assume you wish many gowns?"

Kate nodded, caught up by the fact the shop girl thought her pretty. Most of her life, she'd been led to believe she was rather plain. It was tremendously exciting to hear otherwise, even if the girl was being polite. "I do need one for this evening."

The girl's eyebrows shot up, and her pink mouth pursed. "*This* evening?"

Kate's elation dimmed a little. Apparently, she was too blunt. But the duke, he'd been blunt. It had been marvelous, his candor. Kate had a suspicion that to

survive in London she was going to have to flower her speech. “It is terribly important. Couldn’t a young woman of your talents help me?” she coaxed.

“Expense is not a question,” Imogen added quickly, her voice honeyed with compliment.

The smile beamed right back into place on the girl’s face. “I am certain I can find something. Now,” she said, gesturing to the door festooned with pale, grey silk curtains. “Let us have you fitted.”



Hunt was in a foul mood, and Ryder was glad to be shuck of his company. There’d be no dealing with him until they could both drown themselves in drink and women.

The bill had died the slow, torturous death of one drowning in sludge.

The conservatives were terrified of giving rein to the people. They kept citing France and the present rebellion taking place. But in Ryder’s opinion it was the very strictness of the French nobility that had led to its downfall. If England wasn’t careful, they’d find themselves only a few steps behind.

In any case, Hunt had begun to shout during the session, something he had never done till he involved himself in politics. The opposing party shouted back and then both sides rushed each other. In the fracas, Ryder’s coat had been torn. Nothing like two groups of men going for each other’s throats in the House of Lords.

Ryder made his way up Bond Street on foot, glad to be free of his servants for the afternoon. The country was the only place a man might really find freedom from constant attention, but he hated the country. Immensely.

Unlike the majority of his peers he actually liked to do everyday tasks, and he damn well wasn’t going to pitch his coat at his valet when he could take it to Bond Street himself and have it fixed.

He paused as he passed Madame Sophie’s. It had been Jane’s favorite store. She’d loved to take him in and look over the colorful fabrics, teasing him that it was a husband’s position to ensure his wife was properly dressed.

He glanced through the window. His eyes widened. For there standing with Imogen Cavendish was. . . *her*.

She stood at an angle to him, her face almost in profile. Under the morning light, her hair shone with hints of red and honey. She smiled brightly at the shop girl, causing her cheeks to glow with a rosy hue. And once again, she was in that

ridiculously plain grey gown. It hugged her voluptuous frame, but aside from its form-fitted simplicity, it was a gown meant for a plain woman, not the fiery woman who had the cheek to demand he seduce her.

His gloved fists tightened as he looked up the street. He should keep walking to his tailors. The thought was definitely there, urging him to move on, but he couldn't stop himself from looking back at the woman who managed to captivate him. Even more disconcerting, his feet refused to cooperate by moving up the street, and he kept staring like a boy transfixed by the candy shop. Candy meant to delight the eye and cause one to enjoy the moment in which it touched the tongue.

The young shop girl, Lisette, who had waited upon him and Jane almost five years ago now, beamed at his mysterious lady. As Frenchwomen were so apt to do, she could see past the dowdy gown and see the beauty of the woman before her.

The ladies entered into the inner sanctum of tedious fittings, and the next thing Ryder knew, he was stepping into the shop, unable to pull himself from the space she had just occupied. Amidst the colorful drapings swathed in every corner of the room, he felt like an undertaker in his black, but color hadn't touched his frame since Jane had been laid in the dark earth.

"*Monsieur, les duc?*" Ami bustled into the room, her pink shepherdess costume a perfect match for her coal black hair and doll-like beauty. "It has been far too long."

The unspoken words of sympathy hung between them for several seconds, and he was damned tempted to turn and bolt from the store.

But as if an actress on cue, she batted her long lashes up at him, and her lips parted in a coy smile. "Whatever can I help with? Perhaps you would like to see a costume modeled for you, *non?*"

Ryder barely glanced at her, shoving aside the memories before they rushed in. It wasn't as if he would let himself go to pieces in a woman's shop.

His gaze fell on a bolt of opalescent silk shot through with silver thread. It was almost an exact match to *her* wild eyes. Instantly, he could see his mysterious lady swathed in the shimmering fabric, her legs bare and her breasts barely covered like some Aphrodite bathed in silvery waters.

"The young woman with Lady Cavendish," he said, his voice growing tight at the image of his lady barely clad, her nipples teased to hardness by the rich fabric. "Can you make her a gown in that color?"

Ami stared blankly for a moment then nodded. "We have a gown prepared in that color, but it is not finished."

"Show it to me."

She bobbed a curtsy and swept into the back room.

Ryder shifted on his boots and clasped his hands behind his back. Then blinked. What the hell was he doing? Damn it, he was buying a dress for a woman he planned to avoid, that's what he was doing.

His blood hummed, and his gaze darted to the curtains that led to the fitting rooms. Was she still dressed? Or were her smooth thighs naked? She'd worn stockings of plain wool, and if he had to guess her corset had been just as simple. Lord, how he would love to see her with white silk stockings tied with red ribbons and a corset of wine brocade.

He snorted. She'd never wear such a thing. She was inexperienced and good. That had been clear on her beautiful face. Like. . . Jane. Ryder swallowed and closed his eyes for a moment.

Like Jane, this young woman seemed untouched by the selfish and cruel ways of the women he knew. Women, who bedecked themselves in clothing purely meant to incite a man's lust. It was for the best she was no doubt choosing another simple gown. Hadn't he sent her off to keep her from himself and the decadence of the women in his world? Yet, here he was about to buy a beautiful gown for her. A hint of shame rolled through him. But he kept standing there, waiting.

Ami popped back into the room. He snapped his eyes open to the sight of her black curls bouncing as she hefted a blue silk box. She carefully placed it down on the table at the far end of the room. "Please, *monsieur*?" She gestured with her small hand for him to join her by the box.

He came up beside her and gazed down, waiting for her to reveal the costume.

She pulled the ribbons and lifted the lid. "It was meant for a duchess, but the color did not suit."

Ryder gazed down at the contents. The silk shone with the colors of an opal, purple, pink and silver were shot through the ivory silk. Seed pearls lined the bodice and were scattered over the lush skirt. He had chosen gowns for countless women as presents. But this one was perfect for her. With her stormy grey blue eyes, the gems' colors would light her eyes to the color of silver. He waved at the concoction of frothy elegance. "Take it into her."

"*Oui*," Ami bobbed a quick curtsy.

“Only do not inform her who it is from.” The last thing he wanted was her to show up at his door front in the dress waiting for him to unwrap her like a present. He’d sent her away once; twice would be damn well impossible.

Ami closed the box and hurried into the next room. Ryder turned, allowing himself to linger for a few more moments, envisioning the surprise and joy on her face as she opened the box. He wouldn’t think of her sliding the fabric over her arms and legs. Nor would he think about the fabric he touched pressing to her breasts.

Ryder drew in a slow breath then headed back out onto Bond Street. She’d enjoy the gown, and that would have to do. It was one thing, the only thing, he could give her.

CHAPTER 5

“*No* dancing?” Kate exclaimed, just as the carriage bounced over a particularly large hole in the cobbled street.

Imogen’s eyes sparkled as if she knew some great sin but was refusing to reveal it.

The carriage pulled to a stop, and Kate resisted a frown. Her first London party and no dancing. She’d dreamed of dancing for years, and lord knew she had practiced enough with her old aunt. The poor dear had many a blue toe from Kate’s blunders, but now she was quite proficient, thank you very much. And well, she very much wanted a chance to finally employ all her practice.

Imogen patted a hand to her hair which had been curled and twisted until it towered in a fascinatingly beautiful way above her head. Her hand sparked with ruby and diamond rings. “Never fear. There shall be *other* amusements.”

The footman opened the door, and the sounds of an orchestra and loud voices, laughing and talking poured in. Kate froze for a moment. Lord, they weren’t even inside yet.

Her heart pounded with excitement as she stood on the edge of the most sinful set of London. She was about to make her entrance, and she was going to make it as memorable as possible. After all, how many other young women would die to be in her diamond trimmed slippers right now. And truly, she couldn’t wait to not only see exactly what these *other* amusements were but to participate in them as well.

As it was, she felt like a duchess. It had been incredible luck that whoever had ordered the gown had canceled. It fit to perfection, and she truly felt magical in it, as if it had some secret power. A secret power that would have men at her feet and women gaping at her in envy, and it felt marvelous.

She had to admit her hair, which had taken a good hour to arrange, and her new shoes were a bit intimidating. Imogen had no problem stepping down in her high, backless slippers of crimson brocade. A velvet red rose was pinned into her blonde locks. Feathers peeped up from behind the flower and curled coyly up to her temple.

Well, if Imogen could make it down the steps in those ridiculously high shoes, Kate could. So, without further doubts, she took the footman's hand, clenched her toes into the bottom of her lavender backless slipper and stepped onto the rickety carriage step then onto the royal blue rug which had been rolled out onto the street to protect the guests' footwear. Smiling that she had not indeed tripped and fallen face forward in her precarious slippers, Kate glanced up at the house.

Towering at least four stories high with colonnades, lanterns lined every window. There were at least two dozen footmen in purple and gold livery lighting the walk with torches.

As soon as their carriage pulled away, another pulled right up. And the walk was full of people making their way up to the entrance. "Good lord, Imogen." Her lips twitched. "Has half of London been invited to this *exclusive* party?"

Imogen lifted a hand to her slender throat and laughed. "It would seem so."

Kate arched a brow. "How many others do you think have a good bit of gossip on this woman?"

"Hundreds," Imogen drawled. "After all the countess and scandal are dear friends, but she is an artist at keeping the sharpened tongues of the *ton* dull."

"Well, on we go," Kate said, eager to see what awaited.

She swept up the path, Imogen just behind. As she neared the stairs Kate resisted the urge to adjust her elaborate coif. Her hair, laced with diamond broaches, was curled high upon her head. Unlike Imogen, she hadn't allowed the maids to powder it, which she realized now made her stand out amongst all the sugary curls of the men and women around her.

A group of ladies, their towering powdered hair leaning like a badly built tower, whispered behind their fans as she and Imogen stepped forward. But she didn't care, if anything it was rather exciting. Her own towering curls felt so precarious, she had to walk with a perfectly straight spine which pressed her breasts tighter to her corset. Oh, if only those country biddies could see her now. The old dears would fall into a fit of vapors unlike any Shropshire had ever seen.

The moment they entered the large and crowded foyer, all her senses were assaulted. Orchids and roses poured from the balustrades and crimson silks had been hung festively from the walls.

The countess stood at the center of it all, her black hair towering with flowers and feathers and jewels the size of robin's eggs. Kate forced herself not to gape. It was positively amazing. The woman stood like a goddess descended

amongst mortals. She looked bored beyond all belief, and yet she managed to have half the room staring at her.

Her gown was deep purple with delicate embroidery all along the bodice and borders. The stomacher was so low, the barest hint of pink nipples peeped out above the gold edging. A small boy stood behind her, holding her long and heavily embroidered train. Her eyes, slanted like a cat's, perused the room even as she talked to those who greeted her. Full lips pouted as if she was permanently teasing the opposite sex. This woman exuded a sexual prowess which Kate had never seen before. Not even in Imogen.

It was fascinating and horrifying at once.

Straightening her shoulders, Kate walked forward and extended her hand, ready to throw herself into the arena. For as exciting as this was, she was beginning to realize this world was just as wild as ancient Rome. Lions might attack at any moment.

"My lady," she said, her voice surprisingly low, as if she was tossing out some unseen challenge.

The countess stopped, her full lips curled into a predatory smile. With agonizing slowness, the woman raked her gaze over Kate. "Such delightful freshness," she purred, opening her fan and waving it slowly before her plumped up breasts. "How amusing."

Kate's hand froze in the woman's surprisingly firm grip.

"I do hope you shall enjoy being devoured." The countess pulled her close and whispered in Kate's ear, her breath warm on her skin. "Perhaps I should take the first bite."

Kate started to tilt her head to the side, but stopped immediately as she felt her heavy coif move with her subtle gesture. Instead, she glanced at the woman through veiled eyes. "But my dear countess, I really wouldn't wish you to choke. . . on my lock."

Imogen's eyes rounded, and her fan snapped open faster than prinny's breeches at the sight of a fleshy woman.

Kate held her breath for a moment, almost not believing she dared to be so crude. But it felt bloody marvelous.

The countess blinked and then laughed. She turned to Imogen. Leaning forward, she kissed the air just by her friend's cheek. "What a gem, you have brought to us," she said with cool charm. "I think she will be able to lift our recent ennui."

Imogen placed a hand to her bosom and smiled coquettishly. "I think you shall find she is full of surprises."

"I do hope so."

With that, Imogen grabbed Kate by the arm and led her through the hall into the salon. All the furniture had been removed except for a few lone couches in the darker corners of the room. Each and every one of them was occupied by couples lounging in the shadows and in some cases there were three or four men and women entwined in conversation. Tables with chairs had been set up all about the center of the room. Lords and ladies stood about them, throwing ivory gaming chips down onto the tables. Their voices and laughter filled the room with raucous passion, masking the quartet set discreetly in the farthest corner of the room.

"Well, you've done it," giggled Imogen.

Kate couldn't tear her eyes away from the sight before her. It was positively thrilling. "What?"

"I don't know how, but the countess has decided you are to be reckoned with."

Kate snapped her gaze to Imogen. "Indeed?"

"She took one look at you, and her claws came out. It means you very well may be the new toy of the *ton*." Imogen shook her head. "You are lovely, my dear, but it's the dress. You look as if you've arrived from some heavenly world, and we mortals are lucky to even have you in our presence."

"If they are foolish enough to believe me a goddess," Kate lilted, "I certainly will not dissuade them." If anything she would do everything in her growing arsenal of social weaponry to keep herself so interesting.

"You won't have to." Imogen inclined her head to the crowds of people. "Look, it has already started."

Kate bit back a smile. She'd planned for this for months, and the attention focused in their direction was wonderful confirmation she was no longer a country mouse. Oh, no, she was a woman ready for scandal.

Women were staring, whispering behind their painted fans, and the men were eyeing her, their gazes roving over her face and breasts. All of them seemed to have the same hungry smile, as if one word from her would have them across the room to do her bidding. Kate glanced at Imogen from the corner of her eyes. "Whatever can they be saying?"

"No doubt, it's already circulating you are Percy's poor little widow and ripe for the picking."

“Lovely,” she drawled. The picking part wasn’t so bad, but the last thing she wanted was people feeling sorry for her. Well, she was determined no one would ever know how much it had hurt being foolish enough to believe a man could ever love her for herself and not her hundred thousand a year. “Champagne?”

“Of course.”

A servant walked by, his tray laden with champagne glasses. Imogen plucked up two and passed one to her. “Now, it goes straight to one’s head.” She took a long swallow. “So, you must drink as much of it as possible.”

Kate laughed and took the crystal glass. She lifted it to her lips and immediately felt like doing a little dance. The bubbles tickled her tongue, and it was tart and sweet at once. She couldn’t stop the smile tilting her lips. In fact, she was concerned her cheeks would never recover from all this smiling, but her father had only permitted champagne on birthdays and Christmas. Percy hadn’t permitted her the funds for such luxuries at all.

“Ready for your next bit of debauchery?”

“Hmm?” Kate murmured around her glass.

“Gambling.”

Imogen guided her crimson skirts through the press of ladies and gentlemen and went straight to the square cut faro table. She tossed a blue velvet bag of coins onto the table and a large stack of pink, ivory circles were pushed in her direction.

Kate moved in beside her cousin, her skirts pushing a gentleman with a diamond pasted to his cheek aside. He pursed his rouged lips at her, then sniffed and turned back to the game.

“The bet is one thousand pounds, ladies and gentlemen,” the banker said as they began the round.

Imogen slapped her fan down onto the green felt surface as she followed the play of cards. The rouged lord to her right tossed a stack of at least ten rosy chips into the pile, and a lady in a yellow gown, her hair barely visible beneath the forest of feathers upon her head, tossed twice as much.

Kate nearly choked on a sip of champagne as the other lords and ladies circled round the table threw in thousands of pounds. All of them laughing brightly and drinking as they threw their money away.

Imogen’s face brightened as her chance came. Kate had no idea what was really going on, but a set of cards were turned in a box upon the table. Suddenly Imogen squealed. She clapped her hands, and her rings sparkled in the candlelight. “I’ve won!” She bent over, her breasts dangerously close to falling

out and over the gold embroidered lace lining her extremely low neckline. “Lovely chips!”

Kate laughed with her friend as Imogen raked in nearly ten thousand pounds. “Well, that will pay for a sin or two.”

“Mmmm. I may buy and sell a few scandals before the night is out.”

This was what she’d wanted. To be part of this life, and it was fascinating. The carefree extravagance of these people who did nothing but play and seek out entertainment. Perhaps Percy had played in this very room. He had drunk champagne, thrown away her money and spent a bit of time on the couches in the shadows. Well, now it was her turn to have some freedom. Freedom he had denied her.

Kate glanced about the room. She knew almost no one in London, and she most certainly couldn’t speak to anyone if she hadn’t been introduced, even if she had been bold enough to knock upon the duke’s door in the middle of the night. There were just some things one didn’t do in public. Or at least that’s what she’d been told over and over again by Imogen.

People stood in small groups, chatting. One of the women gestured wildly and nearly smacked her companion in the face. The champagne clearly was having its effect.

It was tantalizing, and Kate found herself watching with the shameless delight of a voyeur.

Others lounged on the small couches. Kate spotted one couple, the young lady draped back. Her yellow skirts were spread about her like a fan, and her breasts were pressed tight together. With eyes hooded with desire, she rested her chin in the cup of her hand. The gentleman beside her was stroking her arm and leaning in towards her as if he might kiss her at any moment.

This never could have happened in Shropshire. For goodness sake, the only movements the old women had been interested in were bodily ones. The stuffy little card parties she’d attended had been painfully boring, and she had been inflicted with lists of gout, slow moving bowels, and the general ill state of the future generation.

Here pleasure of every sense seemed to reign supreme.

As she swept the room, her gaze stopped on a figure dressed in black. He was striding through the crowd, heading for the relative seclusion of the massive fireplace.

Her breath caught in her throat, and her grip tightened on her glass. It was *him*. Licking her lips, Kate tried not stare, but she couldn’t stop herself.

He stopped in front of the fire and spoke to a raven-haired man. After a moment of shameless staring, Kate wondered what the two could possibly be discussing. They stopped as soon as a young woman in pink sashayed by. The dark-haired man reached out and pulled her back against him, bending so her bottom was tucked firmly against his groin. The girl batted his hand away but then held his gaze as she trailed her hand over her own breasts.

Pfft! Had the girl no imagination? Then again men were rather obsessed with women's bosoms. The question was, would the duke be inspired if she pranced over and pressed her bum into his groin? Kate stared some more, wondering if it might indeed be worth a try.

The duke clasped his friend on the back, and the blonde and the girl headed off into the hallway. Kate glanced back to Imogen, but she was immersed in the game. Quickly, she swung her attention back to the duke. More than anything, she wanted to go speak to him. But he hadn't even noticed her and. . .

The duke turned to the fire, leaning against the mantle. His dark eyes seemed vacant as he stared into the flames. Whatever could he be thinking? Well, whatever it was, she would do her utmost to turn his thoughts to more pleasing matters.

Kate squared her shoulders. She'd marched boldly into his house. Surely, crossing a few feet of a drawing room would be infinitely easier.

Swallowing the last half of her champagne, she plunked her glass down on the gaming table and drew in a deep breath. As she made her way to the duke, several different thoughts—*how do you do, are you enjoying the weather, or would you like to bed me here and now*—raced through her mind, but his broad physique kept distracting her. The wicked silhouette of his black frame was heightened by the fire, emphasizing the manner in which his shoulders stretched at the perfect cut of his black evening coat. Lord, he was the most powerful man in the room and not because of his title. Everything about him was such a mystery, from his sudden silences to his clothes.

Entirely clothed in black, he looked like a wolf amongst pretty birds, ready to rip apart all their garish plumes. His muscled body was a strong contrast to many of the softer men around him, and his black hair was pulled back from his strong jaw and chiseled cheek bones.

At last, she stood behind him. She allowed herself to sneak a gaze towards the black coattails trimmed with silver braiding that hid his doubtlessly perfect bum.

As if he sensed someone, he turned.

Kate dropped a little curtsy and slowly lifted her eyes to his. "Good evening, Your Grace."

The room seemed to explode with warmth as their eyes met. Kate clasped her open fan, waving it before her face, hoping no one would notice how he affected her.

His mouth opened, and his dark gaze crackled as he took in her face and corseted breasts. "Good evening."

As if some very clever woman had a hold of her, Kate snapped her fan closed and pressed it to the front of her bodice, right before her plumped up bosom. "Have you found anything to entertain you this evening, Your Grace?"

His eyes, smoldering now, focused for a moment longer on her breasts. Ever so slowly, he dragged his gaze up to her lips. "It depends on what entertainment you had in mind," he murmured, his voice a sandy rumble.

The very sound of it caused her skin to tingle. "I have found that the kind of entertainment you provide is quite addictive."

He tilted his head and folded his arms across his chest, sending a series of rippling muscle movements under his black coat. "Oh?"

Kate's heart raced. If she could only get him alone, perhaps they could truly talk again and more. It was so strange. There were many men here tonight, but only the duke's presence awakened her excitement.

She glanced towards the hallway. "Your touch is quite provocative," she said, in a low tone. "Particularly your mouth," she added, amazed at her own wanton words.

Her comment met with stony silence, and she took a small step forward, determined not to let him send her off again. "This time, I intend to return the favor."

His eyes widened, and a muscle tightened in his cheek. "Your gown is exquisite," he cut in, dropping his arms to his sides. The hasty move once again revealed the pale ribbon wrapped about his wrist.

She blinked at his quick withdrawal. She lowered her fan and glanced down to the shimmering fabric. "Why, thank you. It was a gift."

With his back ramrod straight, he arched a black brow. "Indeed? Who from?"

"I don't know, actually." Kate smiled despite the fact this conversation was not going at all as she hoped. "It was marvelous of them. I have never owned anything so beautiful, and I do wish I could thank the giver."

"Well, it was a damned bad idea," he said tightly. He hesitated then clipped, "Of him. It was damned bad idea of *him*." Abruptly, he turned his gaze on the

room.

Kate opened her mouth to ask if he was always so rude and odd, but then she reflected on his comment. He'd been awfully insistent on those last *hims*.

The duke towered above her, his hands clasped behind his back. He was acting quite bizarrely, avoiding her eye contact. She might have attributed this to her forward behavior but. . . My lord, it seemed impossible but it felt right. He had given her the gown.

Her cheeks heated, and a wonderful sense of glee tingled through her. "You?" she breathed. "It was you, wasn't it?"

He glanced at her then swung his attention back with undue determination to the party before them. "I beg your pardon?"

She ran her hands over the silken folds of her skirt, remembering the way he had run his hands over her plain grey gown. "You gave this to me."

Instantly, he looked down at her, his face dark. "Madam, I do not make it a habit to give gifts to women I don't know."

No, he most likely didn't. That's why this was so special. Without doubt, the Duke of Darkwell had somehow gifted her with this perfect gown and he didn't wish her to know because if she did. . . There'd be no escaping his interest in her.

"Of course," she murmured. "Perhaps some *other* gentleman is responsible then."

His dark face grew even more dower. He gave a quick nod and then left her standing alone by the fire. She should have been horrified, but she wasn't. The Duke of Darkwell was determined to deny his desire for her. But she was having none of it. He wanted her, she wanted him, and that's all there was to it. She'd have Darkwell in her bed before the week was out. Indeed, nothing was going to stop her, certainly not a little cut.



Damnation! Ryder eyed the door like a man eyeing freedom right before being led to Tyburn. What in the hell was she doing here? She was supposed to be a proper young woman—she'd certainly been dressed like one—who'd had a taste for sin, not one of the wild creatures bound for ruin who frequented the countess' parties. Besides, he hadn't saved her from himself to have her flaunting her person about for any jackanape to have a go.

Hunt sauntered up, a glass of whiskey in hand. "You've met the famous bit of lace?" The man looked in ridiculous good humor. Then again, a few moments in the hallway with a lovely woman could do that to a man.

Ryder narrowed his eyes, taking in the state of Hunt's breeches. "Never you mind." He was trying to keep the chit away from sin, not send more demons her way. "Do up your buttons, man."

"Pardon?" Hunt glanced down and laughed dryly. "Bess is a bit of a handful. We're fortunate we were able to return her skirts to rights, never mind my breeches."

"What do you mean by famous?"

"Gods, man," Hunt commented as he worked his buttons to rights. "I thought you of all people should know who she is."

Ryder shook his head, unable to tear his gaze from the gathering group of young bucks about her. In the candlelight, her gown sparkled like one of the crystal champagne glasses. With her golden hair and pale skin, she positively glowed, and clearly every man in the room had noticed.

The thought was damn irritating, and he was regretting have wandered into Madame Sophie's. Why hadn't he bought her a high necked gown meant for the repelling of all lascivious males? That would have been the intelligent thing to do. But no, he had to go and give her something she'd *like*.

"She's only one of the wealthiest women in Britain. A hundred thousand a year. Recently widowed. She's a fat pursed Mecca to all fortune hunting bastards."

"Widowed?" Ryder repeated. What the hell did he mean widowed?

"Mmm. She was married to Percy Darrell, that great idiot."

Percy Darrell? The man had been an utter ass, bright as dross, and had spent every waking moment gaming, wenching or driving about the parks. Sometimes all three at once.

He hadn't even been aware that Darrell had had a wife.

"Kept her locked away in the country, apparently."

A hint of dread took hold of Ryder's stomach. Well, that certainly explained why she'd shown up at his doorstep demanding pleasure. The woman was hellbent on tossing all propriety to the wind.

And he'd gone and given her the gown that was causing every knave in the place to eye her as if they might as a merry group toss her on her back, lift her skirts and take turns giving her a blissful smile all night long. "Do you think she has any idea what she's doing?"

Hunt shrugged. "Country girls can be just as wild as the city ones. Sometimes wilder. And her cousin, Imogen Cavendish, has her by the hand. So, I've no doubt she'll be creating a pleasant little scandal in no time. Besides, a woman like that can do whatever she pleases as long as she doesn't get caught outright."

Ryder eyed Mrs. Darrell. She was smiling up at a randy buck in a wine-colored coat. The blackguard passed her another glass of champagne—which she took. Worse, she batted—*batted*—her damn lashes at the man.

Ryder's fingers curled into fists. The woman was going to be debauched within the week if she kept going as she was. Bloody hell, it might even be tonight. Half a dozen young idiots stood round her. One, a fop in purple velvet, offered her his snuff box to which she shook her head. The motion caused her curled hair to caress her pale shoulders and the diamonds in the curls winked, teasing the men around her.

A fellow in dark green leaned forward and whispered in her ear. Her eyes flared open and then she laughed, exposing the beautiful line of her throat. At that very moment, she glanced Ryder's way, and the humor in her eyes warmed into a banked fire of desire. Then she quickly looked away, taking a sip of champagne.

Hunt cocked his head, surveying the young Mrs. Darrell. "She is rather lovely. And much to the annoyance of those lusty fops, she keeps looking at you. I don't suppose you've considered ushering her over the threshold of—" Hunt voice died down as he took a good look Ryder. He hesitated then tapped Ryder on the shoulder. "You know you can't kill off the rogues with that stare. . . though it is an admirable attempt."

Ryder tore his gaze away and drew in a slow breath. He was being a complete fool. The lady was free, and the very fact he felt like throttling the group of young men gathering about her was a bad sign. It meant he wanted to do more than bed her. He actually wanted to know her. That would never happen. His heart was sure of that.

Hunt threw his head back and laughed.

"What?" Ryder demanded.

"It was her, wasn't it?"

"Who?"

"The innocent chit you turned away." Hunt's laughter died down, and he leveled on Ryder amused eyes. "It was Mrs. Darrell."

Ryder ground his teeth down and fought the urge to belt the smug look off Hunt's face. "It is none of your affair."

"And here you were trying to preserve the poor girl's sense of honor." Hunt patted him on the back then took a long drink of whiskey. He passed the glass to Ryder. "She's a *widow*, my friend. At one of the countess' parties. There's nothing left to save."

Ryder tossed back the contents. "Doesn't matter. I'm not interested."

"Of course not, old boy." Hunt took the empty glass. As he walked away, he said over his shoulder, "Do remind me about your lack of interest after you've killed all those sods fawning over her, would you?"

Ryder smashed his teeth together, holding in a hot-headed retort, one that would only convince his friend he was a mere two steps away from bedding the woman, and let Hunt head off. In all his years, Ryder never been one to lie to himself and now was not a good time to start. Hunt had always known a falsehood the moment it passed Ryder's lips.

He'd only ever wanted one woman the way he now wanted Mrs. Darrell. His wife. His heart would never belong to anyone but Jane. Long ago, he'd sworn to himself that though he could give his body, he would *never* allow any woman to have his heart.

No matter, that Jane left him alone on this godforsaken earth. The thought instantly ripped at his gut. He turned from Mrs. Darrell. He couldn't risk the attachment that such desire encouraged. But damnation, he wanted the woman's sweet mouth under his, he wanted to flick his tongue over the wet folds of her hot cunny and he hungered to thrust his cock deep inside her welcoming body, but worse, he wanted to open up the secrets of her mind and perhaps even the beauty of her heart. That was exactly why he was going to stay away from the entrancing young widow.

Without another thought, and though he knew it would infuriate the countess he was leaving without a word or their typical meeting in her bedroom, Ryder grabbed a carafe of brandy and headed out to his coach.

The only thing going to get the image of that woman surrounded by a crowd of randy admirers out of his head was a dedicated night of drinking.

CHAPTER 6

Where the devil was Imogen?

Dawn's yellow-grey light slipped in through the curtained windows, gently illuminating gentlemen sprawled on the floor. A few ladies draped upon the couches with their skirts rucked up slept, revealing silken stockings, uncaring in their state of inebriation.

Champagne glasses and plates of half eaten pastel colored sweets were everywhere. Kate hesitated, contemplating how she might negotiate her way through the odd mixture of flowers, cards and men strewn upon the floor. Several of the floor bound gentlemen laid face down, their cravats and coats about their bodies. Still, it was disconcerting. She didn't want one to suddenly look as she stepped over his head. So, she tucked her skirts up and darted quickly between the prone bodies.

A few people still gambled, their cries of enthusiasm less hardy than before. Two very drunk ladies stood by the door, holding onto each other to keep upright.

"I adore you," the lady in lavender proclaimed.

"I adore you, too!" the one in yellow gushed.

"You're so adorable," the one in lavender cooed, the sweeping purple flowers in her hair poking at her friends shoulder.

"No. No. My dearest, *you're* adorable!" her friend replied as they embraced and started to blubber. "I don't deserve you!"

Pleasantly tipsy, Kate merely shook her head. When she reached the far side of the room, she paused by a table laden with guttering candles. Where the deuce was Imogen? Her feet hurt, and she was ready to fall into bed. Though sadly, since the duke had departed, it would be alone.

A giggle drifted in from the hallway, and Kate tensed. No. It couldn't be. Could it? The giggle came again, and she groaned. At the same time she had to fight back her own laugh. Nothing like this would have happened in Shropshire!

She turned and tiptoed into the dark hallway.

Squinting at the darkness, she whispered, "Imogen?"

There was no reply, only the dimness of the long, dark corridor.

In fact, it was rather quiet out in the hall. She went a little further down the dim, dawn lit passageway, weaving to the right. She stopped and clapped a hand over her mouth to stop her laugh. My, who knew walking could be so difficult?

“Imogen?” she whispered again.

A door to her right popped open, and Imogen tumbled out. She grabbed hold of Kate, the feathers and red rose in her hair dangerously tilting to the side. Even stranger, a long piece of white fabric was wrapped around her forehead, just above her eyes.

“Oh!” she gasped then hiccupped. “How fortunate you were here to catch me.” A sloppy smile brightened her face.

Kate peered into the doorway and sucked in a quick breath. There was a man. . . in the *closet*. A *very* attractive man. She blinked, trying for a better view in the unlit little square room. The fellow lounged back against the wall. His livery shirt was open as far as it might go, covering a chest that would cause any sculptor to swoon. A tightly curled white wig and a gold embroidered coat winked up from the floor, and of all things, he was missing a shoe.

Still, he managed to be positively delicious as he stared out with shockingly green eyes.

“Who’s that?” Kate asked, her voice deep with a touch of admiration at Imogen’s audacity.

Imogen righted herself and weaved a little to the left. She patted her hair and pulled at the white fabric—which under closer consideration appeared to be the fellow’s cravat—until it slipped free. She looked back at the man and shook her head at him. “Naughty.”

Weaving towards Kate, Imogen confessed, “He wanted me blindfolded!”

Kate opened her mouth then closed it, having no idea what one should say in response to a cravat being tied about her cousin’s eyes. With a footman. In the closet.

And him missing vital items of clothing.

The fellow in the closet righted his breeches and tucked his shirt back into the dark green livery. He gave his white wig a glance but then ignored it, leaving his blond hair wild, doubtlessly from Imogen’s hands. Strolling out of the little space and into the hall, he raked a hot gaze up and down Kate then yanked Imogen to his side, rubbing his lips gently against her neck. “Who is your friend then, love?”

Imogen’s eyes widened, and she giggled again. “Terribly rude. . .” she tugged at her skirts, “of me.” Frowning she glanced over her shoulder and tugged at her

skirts again. “Datted chemise.” She batted her eyes up at her Lothario. “Be a dear?”

The servant swatted her bottom as best he could through the layers of fabric then pulled her skirts back down over her chemise. “Hate to cover all that glory.”

Imogen shook her head, her curls bouncing. “Silly man.”

Kate cleared her throat. “Imogen? Who is that?”

“Hmm? Oh yes.” Imogen stroked his hard chest. “This is dear, dear—” she bit her lower lip then glanced up at the ceiling as if the answer might be written upon it.

“Reginald,” the man supplied.

Imogen beamed, and her gaze snapped back to Kate. “Yes. Dear, dear Reginald. Our lovely duke’s footman.”

Darkwell’s footman? Well, that was certainly juicy news. What was he still doing here? Locked in the closet was he? Kate took a step closer, as if somehow she might absorb information about her duke just by standing next to his servant.

Reginald adjusted the front placate of his breeches, a bulge growing ever more pronounced, and gave Kate a wink. “I hear you’ve a fancy for the duke, madam.”

Kate straightened at the man’s impertinence. How in the devil did he know? Did everyone know or had Imogen simply been unable to resist sharing a bit of gossip. And was he really that big beneath his breeches? It was really quite distracting. “I beg your pardon?”

“Now don’t get in a twist, Kate. Reginald is our dear, dear. . .” Imogen swayed and Reginald cradled her about the waist a little more firmly, “*friend*. Moment I found he worked for the duke, I said to myself. . . . I said, Imogen, you must, must be nice to this man so he will help dear, dear Kate. . . and!” She tugged a bit of parchment from between her breasts. “He’s given us a list.”

A thrill of anticipation ran through her. “What sort of list?”

“Oh, when the duke rides! Who he rides. . . I mean *what* he rides,” she whispered. “What operas he prefers, when he shows his lovely face at his club.” Imogen took a step forward, her face radiant as if she’d just dedicated herself to some truly noble cause. “We shall hunt him like a fox! And you shall triumph.”

Imogen’s enthusiasm was certainly catching, and if she really had this kind of information the duke was in for a deal of trouble. Kate arched a brow. “When do we start?”

Imogen clapped her hands. “Immediately. But now, we should sleep. Don’t you think, Reginald?”

Reginald just smiled down at her and shook his head. "Not yet, my pet."

The footman stretched forward with one brawny arm and wrapped his strong hand about Kate's waist and pulled her near. "Now, my lovely ladies, let's have a chat."

"Here now!" Kate exclaimed, but at the same time she couldn't help but be amazed at the hardness of the fellow's body.

"Just a bit of gossip, madam," the footman said, his voice husky against her ear. The faint scent of brandy surrounded him.

Lovely, the man was foxed. Then again, she'd take whatever information she could get about Darkwell.

"Just a bit of advice to help you on your quest." He cuddled her and Imogen closer to his chest. "Now, my ladies, have you not considered his black attire?"

Kate hesitated. In fact, she had wondered at that.

Reginald dipped his head and nuzzled his nose against her hair. "He's still in mourning."

"In mourning." Kate blinked. "For who?"

"His wife, of course."

She leaned further into him, if that were possible. Perhaps, somewhere at some time she had read that the duke had been married, but she didn't recall it. "How long ago did she die?"

Imogen pushed at Reginald and stumbled forward. She thrust her chin into the air and gave the footman a haughty look. "This is a very dark conversation for our merry mood."

"Imogen," Kate protested. She bloody well wanted to know what Reginald knew.

"No. I'm tired. I wish to return home." Imogen squared her shoulders and started down the hallway. Crookedly.

"Wait," Kate hissed. What had soured her mood? "Blast." Giving Reginald a quick smile, she started off after her friend.

"Good luck, madam," Reginald called softly. "He could use a bit of happiness."

Kate barely heard him as she hurried after Imogen and grabbed her friend about the waist. They staggered down the steps and out to their carriage. Imogen stumbled in.

Giving one glance at the house where she'd made her debut into the underbelly of London society, Kate wondered just what she'd gotten involved in.

At any rate, she had a list. And the Duke of Darkwell had no idea he was about to become the most chased man in London.



Ryder guzzled down the last of his ale and held up the empty tankard.

“Do I look like a barmaid?”

Squinting he glanced up at Hunt. The world was fuzzy but not so fuzzy he couldn’t make out the duke’s imperious figure. “Tip a pyke.”

Hunt smiled merrily. “No, thank you.”

Ryder shrugged. “Have some ale then.”

“Felt in the mood for a bit of rough?” Hunt slung off his cloak and sat beside him on the splintery wooden bench at The Maiden’s Legs Tavern.

Ryder sure as hell hadn’t felt like immersing himself amongst the blue-blooded halls of his club. A man took his life in his hands coming down to the East India Docks at this hour, but, hell what was life worth anyway? “Come,” he drawled. “This is paradise.”

The din of the gin sots had deafened him to the screech of the fiddler in the corner. Damnation, he couldn’t even smell the faint odor of sweat, piss, and dog any longer, he’d been here so long.

Hunt snorted. “Paradise, my arse.”

A girl with reddish-blond hair sauntered up to them, balancing a tray laden with tankards. A smile parted her plump rouged lips exposing slightly yellow teeth. Her faded gown clung to her lush frame, and her shift barely covered her nipples.

She leaned over and gave Hunt a smile. “Your friend’s in a bit of a mood. I hope you’re jollier.”

He leaned back, resting an elbow against the rough table. “I am charm itself, love. Especially to a girl with your attributes.”

She looked a bit confused, her brows drawing together. “Attribu—whots?”

He eyed her pillowy breasts. “It’s the greatest of compliments, I assure you.”

“I thought as much,” she lilted. Preening, she took Hunt’s hand, then placed it about her waist. Without waiting for an invitation, and with tremendous skill, she sat in his lap and plunked down the ales upon the wood table. “Now, you’ve lovely manners.” She eyed Ryder. “Though he’s a handsome bugger too.”

“Just a pretty face,” Hunt assured as he took her chin and turned her face back toward himself.

Giggling, her hand wandered over Hunt's chest then traveled to his breeches. "I've always fancied me a pair of lords."

Ryder grabbed his mug and took a long gulp. He couldn't help but feel a bit of admiration for the greedy barmaid. After all, he'd been part of the more is never enough club himself for quite some time. However, fending off lusty wenches was not his idea of a good night. At least, not this eve. But now that Hunt was here—wherever the man went, women soon followed.

Hunt gave her a wolfish grin. "Some other time, love. My friend and I have serious drinking to do."

She sighed, standing. "Do let me know if you tire of his company."

Hunt patted her bum then slipped a shilling between her voluptuous breasts. "Keep the spirits coming, my sweet."

The bar maid gave him a wink and wandered off.

Turning back to Ryder, Hunt grasped his tankard. "What the devil is wrong with you?"

"Nothing."

Eyeing the thick black ale floating in his tankard, Hunt grimaced. "And what the devil are we drinking?"

Ryder threw him a slurred grin. "Tastes like a chamber pot, but it's effective in eliminating even the most insistent of thoughts."

Hunt tossed back half the pint then shuddered. "Tastes like Thames water. Or worse."

"And how would you know—"

Hunt arched a brow. "Recall last February?"

Ryder started to protest, but recalled a little over a year ago, he and Hunt had gotten foxed at this very tavern. They'd brawled with a group of sailors and all ended up in the river. He was lucky he hadn't gone toes up from the filth.

Hunt pulled at his queue, quickly brushing his hair back and sweeping it away from his face. "We're prevaricating."

Damn. Ryder stared at the bottom of his nearly empty tankard. Where was the barmaid when he actually needed her? The last thing he wanted to see was the thing empty. "Prevaricating what?"

"Your problem, my friend."

"I don't have a problem." Ryder frowned at the sludge at lining the tin mug. Perhaps he should switch to gin. At least then, his innards might still be intact come the dawn.

“You force me to guess at your difficulties,” Hunt warned, waving for the barmaid.

As if she knew exactly what he was thinking, she brought a tray with four small wooden cups of gin. She eyed Ryder and darted off.

Reaching for the gin cup, he waved it at Hunt. “Like I said, my life’s as right as. . .” he swallowed a big breath then tossed the gin back. “Rain.”

“Hmm.” Hunt rested his arm on the table and drummed his fingers on the peeling surface. “Perhaps you’ve taken vows of chastity?”

Ryder’s head started to pound. The bastard really was going to interrogate him. Why couldn’t he be like everyone else and be content to leave him be?

Hunt tilted his head. “Are you heading off to a monastery?”

“No.”

“Contemplating a life of prayer?”

“No.”

Hunt fingered his chin for a moment as if in deep thought then slammed his hand on the table. “Then what the hell is stopping you?”

The glasses jumped and rattled, and Ryder snapped towards Hunt. “From what?”

“From showing Mrs. Darrell a very good time.”

“She’s too innocent for me,” Ryder confessed. She needed a man who could give her his heart. His heart still belonged very much to one woman. He couldn’t risk giving it to another.

Sighing, Ryder took another drink of ale from a tankard that had miraculously appeared at his elbow. He fought back a grimace at the taste after the gin. But in a few seconds he wouldn’t be able to taste anything. If he was lucky in about an hour, he wouldn’t feel anything either. “You’ve seen her. Doesn’t belong. Deserves more, too.”

He daren’t even mention Jane. He’d given up voicing his pain over her loss. Hunt would simply repeat the obvious. Let go. Well, Ryder couldn’t let go. He didn’t want to.

Hunt leaned back and remained silent, his blue eyes penetrating.

Ryder eyed him. “It won’t work.”

“What won’t?” Hunt inquired, his eyes widening with mock innocence.

Ryder shook his glass at him and scowled. “Whatever argument you’re composing.”

“Argue? Me? Never.”

“Good.” Ryder nodded, glad Hunt was finally seeing reason. “Don’t mention her name again.” He’d come here to forget about her, not rabbit on till dawn.

“I suppose you’ve considered what will happen if you don’t do the honors with the dear lady?”

Ryder narrowed his eyes. Hunt was on dangerous ground, and he was in no humor to be discussing her. Especially linked with other men. “What?” he challenged.

Hunt lifted his wooden cup, pausing, and let the moment draw out before he drawled, “Some green idiot will get a hold of her, stick his cock in her with no ado and he’ll crow at his conquest. She’ll be no better off than when she came to London and she’ll be just as ruined. Only with you, you’d actually have paid attention to what she desired.”

The image of some fop rutting over Mrs. Darrell churned the gin around his stomach at an alarming rate. “Say that again, and I will shove your nose into your damned brain.”

Hunt shrugged. “Merely speaking the truth.”

Ryder shifted on the bench. If he wasn’t careful his damned friend was going to have him rationalizing the debauchery of the very women he’d sworn not to touch again. “She’s a bloody angel, man.”

Hunt laughed. “An angel who wants to walk about on earth for a bit and she’s going to make a piss poor choice because of it. Women always do, or at least women as inexperienced as that. For God’s sake, look at the man she married! She has deplorable taste in men.”

She wanted him, which only solidified her poor judgment. “She shouldn’t do it at all,” he growled.

“What, remain chaste? That’s a laugh coming from you.”

“Not chaste. Just. She deserves someone who will care for her.”

“How do you know what she deserves?” Hunt demanded seriously.

“I just do.” And he did. He’d been in Mrs. Darrell’s presence twice and seen her from afar once. Yet, it was clear to him she was above the base pleasure seekers she so longed to slum with. If she truly understood the kind of people she was trying to emulate, she would hie off to the country before one could say Dick Turpine.

Fingering the rim of his cup, Hunt said casually, “Well, if you won’t do it, perhaps I’ll take her in hand. She is lovely and I’d hate to see her used ill by some vapid buck.”

Fury barreled down Ryder's veins, and he slammed his fists down on the table. There was no way in Hell someone like Hunt was going to get his dirty paws on a woman like Mrs. Darrell. "You touch her and I'll force feed you your cock one bite at a time."

Hunt leaned forward, a smirk curling his lips. "Why the hell should you care?" He shook his head slightly. "You don't want her."

Ryder launched forward and grabbed Hunt's shirt. "I didn't say I don't want her. Wanting her is not the problem."

Hunt blinked. "That's it, isn't it?"

"What?" Ryder loosened his grip and looked away, deliberately avoiding the obvious answer.

Hunt whistled lowly. "You actually like her."

"Of course I do," he said tersely. "There's something bloody hypnotic about her."

"No. Not lust, old man. You *like* this one. God knows we are all aware of the fact you only bed women you could never like. God's blood, you still bed that cat, the Countess of Carmine."

The countess was just one woman in the long line of cold, power hungry women he bedded to slake his lust. Hunt was right. Ryder didn't bed women he might come to like. It was a luxury he never afforded himself. He couldn't. Somehow it felt like a horrid betrayal of Jane. And he would never betray her memory. He'd worn her ribbon since her death as a daily reminder. Ryder dropped his gaze to the table, the anger crackling up inside him. "You know why I must do what I do."

"Darkwell—"

Suddenly tired, Ryder forced himself to his feet. He just couldn't discuss this. Not even with his oldest friend.

Hunt hesitated, his eyes darkening as if he was considering pushing. Finally, he sighed and nodded. "Off we go."

Wordlessly, they headed out to the dark street.

The cold pierced the wool wrapped around Ryder and his boots squelched in the thick mud as he strode ahead.

They walked for several moments in silence, before Hunt said softly, "Darkwell, it wasn't your fault. We all know it. When are you going—"

"Enough," Ryder barked. "I don't force you to talk about your father. Don't force this on me."

"Bastard." Hunt's face hardened under the moon's glow.

“Yes,” he said, but this time his voice was a tired whisper.

No one could convince him to put aside the truth. Very simply, it was something he would never allow himself to forget. How careless he had been. How that carelessness had destroyed his life. And how if he wasn’t careful, that carelessness could destroy someone else.

CHAPTER 7

Everyone was staring at her. Again. Which of course was particularly ridiculous considering an extremely lavish performance with live barnyard animals was taking place on the stage below, but as Kate was learning the *ton* preferred to be entertained by other members of the *ton*.

Dozens of opera glasses were positioned towards her, the candlelight reflecting off the glasses, sending gleams of rainbow light in her direction. Any other woman of society would be delighted. But what good was all this attention if the one man she wanted wasn't anywhere to be seen?

Still, it was rather exciting. The most attention she'd ever known had been an extremely ardent group of ladies bent on the improvement of the Little Tindwing church. She'd listened for hours regarding the benefits of French versus Irish lace.

This was far more pleasurable considering all she had to do was be herself.

"You know, I do think you shall have to take extreme measures if you wish to seduce him," Imogen murmured behind her pink silk fan.

Kate gave her a withering look. "Don't you think hunting him is drastic enough?" The only reason they were even at the opera was because *dear, dear Reginald* assured them the duke would be making an appearance tonight.

"Absolutely not. This is but one step in a long series of dances."

Why must it be so complicated? She wanted the duke, he wanted her, and that as far as she was concerned, should have been enough. The duke knew exactly what he was doing and she, novice that she was, was left to poke about in the dark.

It would all be worth it though. Heavens, she would run from one end of England to another if it meant having the duke's mouth upon her body again. Every time she thought of his tongue upon her thighs, she shivered.

"Hello, darling!" trilled a voice from the curtains.

Kate shifted on her chair, twisting in her new ivory gown. Immediately her eyes widened. The woman in the curtained way was absolutely beautiful. Ridiculously beautiful. So beautiful, she would leave every woman behind if there was to be an impromptu contest in loveliness.

Imogen stretched out her hands. "To be certain, it has been ages!"

The other woman sashayed into the box, her vast indigo skirts embroidered with gold and robin's egg fringe. The lady's silken black hair curled about her face and was pinned in several places with golden stars dripping with sapphires.

She leaned over and kissed Imogen upon the cheek. "You simply must go to St. Petersburg," she said, her voice a rich hum. Snapping her peacock fan open she whispered, "The men, my dear. The Russian men. They have a stamina English men would only dream of. All that cold weather, no doubt."

Imogen pulled the woman down onto the delicate French chair between herself and Kate. "Were you ravished by a regiment of Cossacks?"

The woman fluttered her fan before her breasts. "Be still my beating heart. How I dearly miss their enthusiasm." Then she turned on Kate and quite boldly asked, "Now who might this be?"

Imogen tilted her head and smiled. "My friend, the lovely Mrs. Darrell. Now, Mrs. Darrell, you must meet the incomparable Mrs. Barton."

"The actress?" Kate blurted before she could stop herself.

"Indeed," Mrs. Barton drawled. "They've let you up from the country, I see."

Kate's cheeks burned as she had been rather rude. But must so many people observe her lack of polish? "Actually, I've liberated myself from the country."

"How marvelous!" Mrs. Barton gestured with her fan to the mass of society watching each other. "These old buzzards love a bit of fresh air."

Laughing at the woman's saucy candor, Kate noticed that dozens more opera glasses had been turned in their direction. Apparently, Mrs. Barton was a fascinating entity to the *ton* as well. "Well, I suppose I am about as fresh as the air comes."

"How brave of you to admit it," Mrs. Barton lilted, her dark eyes dancing with growing warmth. "I too was once a country girl. Hated it. Who wants that dreary existence, I ask you?"

Kate smiled, adoring the woman's joviality. "Do you care for the opera?"

"I loathe it. A bunch of silly ninnies prancing about in gilded costumes trying not to step in whatever the horses leave behind. And why must they insist on having live animals on stage? Don't they realize that even a donkey is far more entertaining than those ridiculous chorus girls? The silly dancers have only one talent." Mrs. Barton's eyes sparkled with mischief. "Quite flexible. They are always bending over."

Kate covered her mouth to stifle her laughter. Good lord, the woman was scandalous. Perhaps with practice, she too could turn such phrases. Kate glanced

down to the stage then back to Mrs. Barton. "I agree it is all rather odd, but you're an actress, how can you decry the theater?"

"The opera is not theater," Mrs. Barton declared passionately. "It's a circus wrapped up in a pretty package. You'll never catch me dancing about with my limbs bare." She paused, and a wicked smile tilted her lips. "Well, at least not on stage."

Imogen patted Mrs. Barton's arm with her fan. "You will corrupt our young friend."

Mrs. Barton rolled her eyes. "What can we say that is not more shocking than this appallingly bad performance? Just look."

Kate glanced at the stage to witness a foppish young man mincing in a pair of violet tights. Perhaps Mrs. Barton had a point.

"Ah, I see he's arrived," Mrs. Barton said, her voice slightly husky as she glanced through her opera glasses.

"Who?" Kate asked.

"The Duke of Darkwell, of course. Only one man could cause such a stir."

It was true. Three quarters of the audience had turned to gander at his box. The poor singers on stage couldn't compete as the duke stood in his box gazing upon them all with the utmost arrogance. Kate's breath caught in her throat the moment she spotted him. His black coat, waist coat and cravat made him appear sinister in the shadows, but she knew without question there was more to him than the façade he presented.

Without taking her attention from him, she leaned towards Mrs. Barton. "Why are people so fascinated by him?"

"Besides his appearance?" she commented slyly.

Kate tensed. She didn't actually like the idea of another woman finding the duke attractive. Though she had no idea when she'd begun to think of him as hers. Even if at present nothing could be further from the truth.

Mrs. Barton glanced her over with a new degree of interest. "So, you fancy the duke, do you?"

Kate remained silent, but snapped her gaze away from his box.

"Darkwell is all desire touched with a haunting bitterness. Sad really, but undoubtedly compelling."

Swallowing back a hasty retort that Mrs. Barton was surely wrong, Kate clasped her hands in her lap. She knew at first hand the passion Darkwell was capable of, but he was bitter? "How so?"

“Why, the devotion in him. I have never seen it in any other man. He will never forget. Because he will not, no one else will.”

A sense of fascinating dread grabbed hold of her insides. In a few moments of conversation, she was receiving the distinct impression that having an affair with her duke was going to be anything but simple. “Forget what?”

Mrs. Barton rolled her almond eyes. “Goodness, if you are going to survive in London you must know the gossip.”

“The gossip is atrociously old.” Imogen poked at Mrs. Barton with her fan. “Perhaps you shouldn’t tell her.”

With a touch of drama that the most practiced of actresses longed for, Mrs. Barton pressed her hand to her bosom and said wide eyed, “What, throw the girl to the lion without a whip? I would never be so cruel.”

“I don’t understand,” Kate said quickly, ready to pepper the actress with questions. “Tell me what?”

The wide-eyed innocent look faded from Mrs. Barton to be replaced by a calculating smile. “The gossips have died down, they do after five years, but every now and again it resurfaces.” She leaned back in her chair and drew in a slow breath as if she took no real joy from imparting this bit of news. “You see, he was careless with his wife and she died, poor soul.”

Kate bit down so hard on her lip, she had to fight back a gasp. It wasn’t possible!

“Hardly,” Imogen hissed, glancing from side-to-side. “And it was ages ago.”

Mrs. Barton waved her comment away. “Well, perhaps, but he never should have let her take care of his tenants. Now, to his credit, he went into the deepest mourning, locking himself away entirely from society for a whole year. Can you believe that? The man is deliciously and dangerously mad.”

Mad, indeed. Kate couldn’t believe it. She’d been alone in his presence, and though there had been a harshness to him, there’d been something more. When he made love to her body, she felt the tenderness in him. Such tenderness could not exist in a careless man. She knew carelessness all too well from her own husband. “What happened?”

Imogen answered, waving her fan slowly, as if cooling a sudden heat in her cheeks. “Well, he was innocent of any real wrongdoing, but the poor dear died quite miserably of small pox.”

A sad smile curved Mrs. Barton’s bright lips. “Caught it nursing his tenants, as I said.”

Kate's heart clenched in pain for him. How terrible it must have been. She firmly believed men were incapable of love, but now, given the duke's behavior. . . "Did he care for her very much?"

"*Care?* I don't think that strong enough a word, my dear." Mrs. Barton shrugged a slender shoulder. "Given his lack of non-existent relationships with women, one would have to assume he *loved* her."

"I see." For some reason, Kate's spirits dimmed.

"I don't like to speak ill of him, for he is close friends with the Duke of Hunt who is a very close friend of mine. But the entire *ton* is aware of his vicious mood swings. You must have heard how he is merry for weeks and then he disappears for days." Mrs. Barton gently placed her jeweled hand on Kate's. "Such a man should not be trusted."

"But—" She had read it in the gossip sheets.

It was marked knowledge the man was unpredictable; one moment making merry, the next he would lash out in anger. The spontaneity of his fiery moods had led to more than one duel due to the cutting nature of his tongue. She had even met him in the midst of one such mood.

Yet. . . "Surely you exaggerate?"

Mrs. Barton laughed, her face lightening. "Poor girl, I don't mean to set you off him. A woman can take her pleasure of him, and no doubt come out of it a much happier lady. But never trust anything but your body to him, and even then only for a brief tryst. I do think his heart belongs to another lady. One no woman can. . ." Mrs. Barton seemed to search for some delicate word, but at last she drew her hand back and confessed, "ever replace."

Kate bit her lower lip, shock pulsing through her body at this new information. Five years ago, she hadn't been reading the gossip sheets and Imogen hadn't mentioned a word about the duke being such a determined widower. Perhaps Mrs. Barton was just a gossipmonger, but she seemed quite sincere.

Though, there was the fact *dear, dear Reginald* attempted to warn her about the duke. Imogen had stopped him. Which made no sense.

Ever so slowly, Kate turned her gaze up to the duke's box.

The seat was empty. The man she'd seen with him the night before sat in one of the seats.

"Whatever his past, he is fascinating."

"One could never contradict that." Mrs. Barton snapped her fan shut.

Kate stared at the empty seat. "If you'll excuse me, I'm off to the powder room."

Mrs. Barton followed Kate's gaze to the balcony then waggled her brows suggestively. "I do think I shall join you."

Imogen merely nodded at them then turned to pretend to watch the opera. Unsure of the woman's machinations, Kate stood and took the folds of her ivory and teal under skirts in her hands so she could maneuver out into the hall.

As they ducked through the curtained doorway, Mrs. Barton sauntered beside her, their skirts brushing. In the much dimmer light of the hallway, there was a truly wicked look to the woman, as if a dozen sinful thoughts were dancing through her head.

Gently, she linked her arm with Kate's. Her smooth hand caressed her skin. Kate glanced at the actress, startled by the sudden intimacy. It felt surprisingly soothing.

They walked in silence for a moment then Mrs. Barton traced her fan down the length of Kate's arm. "So. You were married to Percy Darrell?"

Immediately, Kate tensed and snuck a look at Mrs. Barton from the corner of her eye. "Yes."

"You poor woman!" She flicked her fan open, waving it back and forth till her curls fluttered. "He was an utter ass."

Kate nearly tripped at the woman's bluntness. But lord, she was right. She was the first person to cry out exactly the kind of man Percy had been, and Kate was nearly dumbstruck by it.

Mrs. Barton leaned towards Kate, her dark eyes wide with concern. The air filled with her exotic perfume. "Do forgive me. Have I committed a faux pas? You didn't love the bounder?"

Kate finally was able to clear her throat, and she laughed. "God, no."

She stopped at the finality of her own words. It was so shaming the way she'd been utterly tricked, not only by Percy but her own emotions. She'd been swept away by a supposed feelings of love which in the end proved to be nothing more than her own imaginations. Her father called her a fool and what was worse, he'd been right. And he had never spoken to her again because of it.

"I did, for a few short months before we wed." Kate swallowed and forced a smile. "But then I learned the true ways of a man."

"Complete bastard. I don't know how he could have neglected such a treasure as yourself. But one will never truly understand the workings of the

male mindset. One moment you are a goddess to them,” she rolled her eyes and slipped her arm around Kate’s waist, “the next no better than a kitchen maid.”

Mrs. Barton glanced right to left, her face alight with a conspiratorial glow. “From the look in your eye just a few moments ago,” she whispered. “You have quite a sharp lust for the duke.”

Kate opened then closed her mouth. There was no real point in denying it, but nor did she wish the woman to proclaim it in public. “Mrs. Barton, I—”

Mrs. Barton tsked. “There is no point in playing the blushing maiden, and while you might consider it absolutely none of my business, I happen to know the duke has wandered into the hall where he always remains till the curtain closes.”

“Why in the devil would he do that?” The answer seemed altogether obvious, but she was trying to fight off the idea of him meeting woman after woman at the opera. “An assignation?”

Mrs. Barton laughed, a rich sound. “No. Not that. You see, the good duke is sweet enough to support the arts; he’s produced a number of my plays, and has many friends who are performers. Years ago, he and his former duchess came at least once a week. Now, he only comes to make an appearance and then goes off till the performance is over. I think the opera makes him quite melancholy. The hallway is quiet, barely lit and everyone is caught up in everyone else’s doing. So, he is allowed solitude.”

“Oh.” Kate couldn’t help but think that for all the man’s brusqueness, he understood how important his patronage must be to his friends. Even if the place, perhaps, gave him painful memories. She couldn’t stop the hint of admiration at his behavior.

Mrs. Barton tilted her dark head towards Kate, causing the sapphires in her hair to wink. “Odd, isn’t it?”

“A little yes,” she acceded.

“We could never say the duke falls into step with society. In fact, I think he’s marched an entirely new path.”

Kate shifted on her high-heeled slippers. This was all much appreciated information, but it still seemed strange that an actress, Mrs. Barton of all people, had followed her out of her box to have such a gossip on the way to the convenience. “I do beg your pardon, but what does any of this have to do with me?”

“He’s utterly alone,” Mrs. Barton said pointedly. “Utterly. Alone.”

They walked slowly, determinedly, and Kate realized they were walking around the outer circle, closer to the duke's box. It became quite clear what this conversation had to do with her. "You mean? You're arranging—" She gasped. Naturally, it should have occurred to her, but this whole intrigue business was still ridiculously foreign.

Mrs. Barton sighed and arched a brow. "Good. You're a quick study."

Kate couldn't stop the silly grin from tilting her lips, or fight the sudden flush of anticipation racing through her. "Let's say in my newfound freedom, I've been doing as much research as possible."

Mrs. Barton bit back a laugh. "How wonderful. A woman should always aspire to the most rounded of educations."

As they curved around, Kate spotted the duke slouched carelessly in a straight backed chair. One black leg stretched out, his polished shoe glinting ever so slightly in the amber glow of the candle light. He sat staring straight down at the floor as if he was contemplating some weighty secret. Perhaps even now, he thought of his wife.

The lines of his chiseled face were hidden in shadow, and his black hair was tied back with a simple velvet string. His strong hands rested on his thighs, the ruby signet ring on his left hand glowing like fire.

"Your Grace, what a delicious surprise," Mrs. Barton drawled.

Kate's chest tightened with excitement. Good lord, he was so handsome. She desperately wanted to trace the contours of his face. But even more so, she wanted the assurance that deepened Mrs. Barton's voice.

Oh so slowly, the duke turned his head in their direction. His face betrayed no emotion, except for the slight flaring of his nostrils and the faint press of his lips into an unwelcoming line.

Kate refused to hesitate, even though at this moment he looked as if he might sink his teeth into them both, and not out of desire. Well, if she had her way, he would indeed have his mouth upon her, but out of need. The need she had seen light his eyes on more than one occasion.

They paused a mere foot before him but he instead of looking at them, he returned his gaze to the floor.

Slipping her arm away, Mrs. Barton smiled. "I do believe Mrs. Darrell should like to *know* you. I've few doubts you will be just as pleased to *know* her."

The duke inclined his head but remained seated.

Mrs. Barton shook her dark head and walked past him. As she did, she rested her hand on his shoulder. “Do play nicely, Your Grace.”

With that, Mrs. Barton disappeared down the hall and into the duke’s box.

Standing right before the Duke of Darkwell, Kate could feel her skin heating to a fever in anticipation. Only his touch was going to ease the growing hunger inside her. The silence and unspoken desire stretched between them. Her breasts pressed tightly against her corset as her breath shortened with desire.

Kate licked her lips and then uttered words she had never said before, “Your Grace, I do believe it is my turn to pleasure you.”

CHAPTER 8

*I*f Ryder had been a man who believed in signs, it would be an indisputable dictate from the gods that he was to bed Mrs. Darrell. Or perhaps the gods just kept shoving her into his path as some sort of cruel punishment.

All he wanted was peace and quiet, and respite from the box that had been such a place of happiness for himself and Jane. And now, here Mrs. Darrell was, the one person he wished to avoid.

With renewed determination, Ryder stared at the garish carpet, refusing to look up into the pale, enigmatic face. Perhaps if he ignored her, the damn chit would leave him be because, quite frankly, he only had so much self-control and it was already a thread that was fast unraveling.

“Does His Grace find the floor to be particularly fascinating?” The toe of her teal slipper peeped out from beneath her skirts, and she rubbed it along the burgundy-colored carpeting. The action exposed her silk-stockinged ankle. “I find it rather uninspired myself.”

His lips twisted, fighting back amusement and the desire to reach out, take that delicate ankle in his grasp and stroke upward. “Do you make it a habit of studying floors?”

“Good Lord no, but it does seem to interest you.”

He couldn’t tear his eyes from her shapely ankle. Damnation, but he wanted to circle it with his hand and prop her foot on his thigh. From there, kiss his way up her leg till he met her soft flesh and then—he blinked. If he wasn’t careful, he’d be hard as a ship’s mast in a moment. “You wish to discuss my interests?”

“I do.” Her voice dipped, touched with huskiness. “In fact, I have every intention of finding out what pleases Your Grace.”

“Indeed?” This was fast heading to him sliding his hands up her skirts, and he was certain that once committed he would be unable to untrench. “What if my principle interest is solitude?”

She took another step closer till her skirts brushed his muscled thigh. “Does Your Grace intend to become a monk? Along with solitude, will you take the vows of poverty?” She lightly bit her lower lip. “Of chastity?”

A dry laugh rumbled past his lips, and he shook his head. Oh, what was he doing? He was holding onto honor with a faltering grasp, that's what the bloody hell he was doing. Yet, to his own shame, he wanted to see how far she would go. Would she truly play this game out to the end? "You are the second person to ask me that in a very short space of time."

"Is there any truth to it then?" Her delicate hand, studded with a pearl ring, very lightly brushed his arm. "I should be very sad."

Lust slammed through his body at the not so innocent touch. Her hand was so light, and yet firm upon his body, he could only imagine those slender fingers wrapped around his cock. "Why should that sadden you?"

"I should be bereft of that marvelous body of yours." She stroked his arm, bending ever so slightly, so her breasts pressed against her corset into two delicious rounds. "But then, I *could* go to you for my confession."

It was tempting to look up and see if her angelic face was flushed with need, but he forced himself to stare straight ahead. The carpet. He could focus on the carpet. Not on her hand, tracing over his arm.

"Confession?" he prompted, damnably curious to see her in this new role of seductress. She was doing a remarkably good job so far.

"I have a great deal to confess," she breathed.

Somehow, he resisted the urge to shift on his chair, but blood was rushing straight to his groin, and by the second he was growing harder. Still, he wasn't going to let her know how very much he was enjoying this game. "You were not given to sin before?"

She trailed her hand down from his shoulder to rest upon his bicep. Her fingers curled at his muscles. "Not until very recently."

It was instinctual. Ryder flexed his muscles, developed from hours and hours of training. He wanted her to know he was strong. "What are the nature of your sins?" he said quietly, his voice half invitation.

"Lust. I lust for a man I should not."

Damnation. She wanted this as badly as he, but soon this game would go too far. "But I am not your confessor," he said quickly. The last thing he wanted was a detailed account of her desires. He'd go mad, and there'd be no holding back.

"I'm glad for it," she said softly, her voice a caress that threw oil onto the fire that was burning inside him.

At last, he looked up and met her gaze. It was a mistake. A damned idiotic error, and he was determined to rip his gaze away and leave her once again standing alone. He couldn't do it. The hunger in her blue grey eyes compelled

him to see what she would do next in her quest. Worse, there was no calculation in her gaze, only a longing mixed with absolute determination.

“This is what I want,” she whispered as she lifted her hand to his face.

Her silken fingers cupped his cheek with gentleness, but it was heightened with desire as she bent and let her mouth linger over his. For one brief moment, he was certain she was going to kiss him, but she didn’t. The scent of cinnamon and roses surrounded him, and her curled hair brushed his cheeks and shoulders. She was waiting. Waiting for him to give into their mutual pleasure. God, he wanted it.

Why not? Why could he not have one moment of heaven in his eternal damnation? Swallowing a strong mix of self-loathing and regret, he worked at the ribbon around his wrist. His fingers shook as he plucked at it. At last it came free and gently, he tucked it into his pocket. Her lips pressed together at his movements, and he knew she wanted to know why he did what he did. But he couldn’t let himself think or mention Jane’s name. Not at this moment.

Not when he wanted this woman before him so much. Indeed, after so much pain, he did deserve just a taste of her.

Before he could think further or let reason test his shaky argument, he slid her onto his lap. He tilted her head back and for a moment, traced his thumb over her lower lip. Winding his fingers into the curls at the nape of her neck, he lowered his head. . . and gave her the softest of kisses.

She gasped into his mouth and arched towards him. The faint touch of their lips was almost cruel considering how much he wanted her, but they were going to enjoy every moment they had.

He traced the line of her lips with his tongue, and she opened to him. Tilting her head further back, he devoured her mouth, sucking gently on her tongue. He fed her kiss after kiss until her hands were grasping his coat. His body was tense, more than ready for her, but he controlled himself by smoothing the line of her throat, moving lower and lower until his lips met the plump rounds of her breasts. He slipped his hand into her corset and lifted her breast so he could swirl his tongue around her nipple. So sweet and soft, it drove him further down the path of no return.

She moaned and leaned into him, pushing her nipple against his lips. He smiled as he drew the soft flesh into his mouth and ever so slightly nibbled at the hard peak.

Her hands wound into his hair, and he savored the slight pull of her fingers tugging at him. But with each caress, he felt himself teetering on the brink of

self-control. If he didn't stop them, they were going to have sex here, in the middle of the opera's empty hall.

The thought was horrifyingly erotic.

What was worse, Mrs. Darrell didn't seem to care. She was mindless under his touch, and he had to—her hand trailed over his thigh and cupped the hard shaft pressing painfully against his breeches.

He sucked in a harsh breath. Reaching down, he pressed her hand tighter to him.

"I want this," she whispered.

Christ, and he wanted to give it to her. The sounds of the opera were still in the third act. It would be some time before it was over and they were secluded enough. Or at least so he convinced himself as he started working at her skirts.

She kissed him wildly as she massaged her hand over his cock. He yanked at her skirts, exposing her thighs. "Straddle me," he ordered.

Without question, she did. Her skirts hitched up at her waist, pouring over his legs. He groaned, knowing her sweet slit was completely exposed. He slid his hands up her thighs then ran his forefinger into her soft folds. He hissed at the feel of her slick hunger. She was more than ready, but he wanted her mad for it. Ryder stroked his finger, moistened by her own dew, over her sensitive folds then coated her swollen little nub.

Kate's breath turned harsh. She held onto him as if she was lost in a storm and he was her only anchor. His finger swirled and flicked till her thighs tensed and then he drove a single finger deep inside her. Her body jerked, and her head dropped back.

"Let yourself enjoy it."

Hell, how he wanted to take her into his mouth, but that would be for later. Right now, he needed to be inside her. As she rocked against his finger, he quickly undid his breeches.

"I need more," she urged.

"I do, too," he breathed against her neck. He wanted them to come together and he was going to do everything he could to give her exactly what she needed.

Kate's body was wild with desire. She knew she needed his hard shaft inside her body. Lord, she'd never had a real desire for the male part. She'd heard it could be heaven, but she'd certainly never experienced anything like it. Right now, oh, she was at heaven's door.

Her body was liquid fire, and she had to hold tight to him to keep herself from falling.

When he drew his finger out of her, she moaned in protest. She wanted more not less.

But soon, he was freeing himself, and he took his hard shaft in his hand. Kate readied herself, but instead of thrusting into her body, he very slowly rubbed the plump tip of it up and down her slit. She jumped at the delicious sensation. Sheer torture. It felt like silk being rubbed between her thighs.

Kate groaned and tried to move her hips in such a way that would force him to thrust deep inside her. Instead, he teased her with the tip of him, running it up and down, and over her most sensitive spot, resting it against her opening until she frowned.

He took her hand and guided it down to his thick, hard length. Kate marveled at its strength. Velvety soft, it was hard and hot. She very carefully rubbed her thumb over the little slit at the top, spreading a bead of moisture over the head.

The duke grabbed her waist, and the muscles in his neck tightened. "Do with me as you will."

Shocked he would give her control, Kate loved the sudden realization she had power over him. She caressed the long shaft and his thighs tensed beneath her. After a moment, Kate couldn't wait any longer, and she guided the tip to her opening. She lowered herself down onto him.

As he entered, there was a moment of discomfort. Years of living in a loveless marriage had left her body almost virginal, but it was over quickly and she welcomed him inch after hard inch. Her eyes widened as his large length filled her deliciously, making her feel as if his body was somehow part of hers.

His dark head dropped back, and he let out a sigh as she slowly rode him. Gazing at her with half-closed eyes, the pure desire in him heated her own veins with the need to please him. At first, she was confused as to what to do. She'd never been in any other position but on her back and in the dark.

Here in the faint glow of the candles, her legs on either side of his hips and her toes balancing on the floor, all she could do was feel. Feel everything, the solid feel of his erection stroking her, the cool air on her skin and his soft breath lightly brushing her hair as she bent over him. And she let sensation take over. Her hands went to his shoulders and his hands to her waist. Rising up and down on her toes, she delighted in the delicious feel of him stroking her inside. Guiding her pace with his hands gripping her waist, he tilted his hips up, thrusting to meet her.

If that wasn't enough, he moved one hand to the place where their bodies met. He circled his fingers over her tight little spot. Goodness, the world was

bursting apart, and she was about to go with it.

In the back of her brain, the orchestra come to a sudden stop. A series of screams echoed around them from the theater. It didn't strike her as odd, not when her body was in the throes of such passion, but the duke stopped. His body froze, and his eyes opened. She grabbed him tighter, but he stilled her, his hands locking down on her body.

"Fire!" A voice screamed.

Kate frowned, trying to make sense of the sudden change. Her entire body felt like liquid. She was so close.

"Fire," the duke hissed, looking up at her.

"What?" she murmured, so hot she could barely stand it.

"Fire," he said tightly, his face darkening as he struggled to slip his cock free. "There's a bloody fire!"

The rush of hundreds of feet thudded on the carpeted surface, and Kate abruptly realized what was happening. Good lord! Quickly, she stuffed her breasts back into her corset, then scrambled to unseat herself, but her feet caught in her skirts. It was all she could do to keep herself from falling to the floor.

"What are we going to do?" she demanded. Hysteria seized her and she quipped, "Make a full confession?"

As she struggled to get up from his lap, her shaky legs wobbled.

The curtains from a dozen boxes swung open and lords and ladies poured into the hall, panic on their powdered and rouged faces.

However, the sight of Kate balanced on the Duke of Darkwell's lap, her skirts up about her thighs, managed to bring them all to a halt.

The horde of lords and ladies gaped.

A few of the men eyed her appreciatively. A few ladies gazed on in envy, their eyes searching vicariously over them, but the vast majority stood with utter shock upon their faces. One or two pointed, and one lady had the audacity to faint.

Kate stared back at them as if she'd been frozen in ice. If she wished it hard enough, perhaps they would all go away.

"Bloody hell," Darkwell growled as he propped Kate up onto coltish legs. He whipped his coat off, seemingly heedless of the fact his nether regions were still exposed. Quickly, he draped the garment over her head and ordered, "Move."

This couldn't be happening! The crowd seemed to move in slow motion, and Darkwell swept her up into his arms and marched quickly down the wide sweeping stairs.

Despite his speed and his quick thinking with the coat, Kate heard the whispers.

“Is that her?”

“Is that Mrs. Darrell?”

“Mrs. Darrell and Darkwell?”

“They were doing what?!”

“In the hall?”

“The what?!”

“The hall!”

The gasps and exclamations buzzed around them, taking the place of *fire*.

Darkwell didn't let that stop him. He kept moving with long strides. Holding tight onto his shoulders, Kate shook. Every bit of her body was still wildly alive from the desire he'd awakened in her but now horror was thrown into the mix.

Someone cried out, “Fire, damn you all!” And everyone started milling again, making for the doors.

But Kate felt, even with the coat over her head, a hundred pairs of eyes upon her.

Cold air assailed her arms and suddenly she was being flung into a coach. She bounced on the leather seat and yanked the duke's coat from her head. Biting down on her lower lip, she tried to ignore his readjusting his breeches as he climbed in.

Darkwell sat across from her his eyes ablaze. A muscle ticked in his cheek. The fury hardening his features was intense. She wasn't sure if he was furious with her, himself or the witnesses. Perhaps all three.

She glanced out the glass window as hundreds of theater patrons poured out the doors. Fire licked the rooftop. Of all the nights that something of this nature had to happen, it had to be the one where she finally had her chance with the duke.

And she hadn't even gotten to finish.

What struck her as she glanced out the window was that a whole crowd was watching the duke's carriage maneuvering its way through the chokehold of other vehicles. It couldn't have been that bad. Indeed, it couldn't. Kate felt a wave of hysteria rise inside her, and she laughed. The sound bubbled up from her, pouring out her lips.

“What, madam,” the duke growled. “Could possibly amuse you?”

She turned to Darkwell. Not even his austere face could stop the building shock inside her. She laughed again. “I promised myself I'd cause a scandal.”

“Congratulations.” The duke raised a black brow. “You’ve succeeded.”

Yes, and at the rate she was going, she would set the record for all scandals to come. Kate shook her head, her insides rattling with uncontrollable laughter.

She had only one question. A question she should have asked herself before she’d begun her quest for sin. Once one committed what was no doubt the scandal of the season, what exactly did one do next?

CHAPTER 9

The woman was mad. Absolutely mad. And of course, he'd bloody debauched her. Her laughter filled the coach like a bright bubbling spring. Preposterously, he loved the sound. Which most likely made him mad was well. But the laugh was optimistic and edged with pride at her own accomplishment, or was it panic? Whatever it damn well was, it was mad. Sodding loolah.

"Come, Your Grace, surely you see some humor in this situation." She pressed a hand to her rosy cheek. "This isn't Hell after all. Surely there's no need to look as if you've just swallowed brimstone."

"Mrs. Darrell, I may have just swallowed my own doom, all thanks to your blasted determination."

It wasn't her fault, but he couldn't stop the anger. He was the experienced one in these matters. It was his fault. Which he should have been used to by now. It was impossible for him to form relationships where one party didn't end up either dead or in extreme trouble.

He should have listened to his instincts. He'd known deep down he *should* avoid this woman. Known associating her might lead him to betray Jane's memory.

For a brief, too brief he had to admit, moment, he'd ignored his instincts and now look where he was. In the middle of a biblical scale scandal.

Worse, he'd ignored his own promise to remain true to Jane in his heart and soul. Bastard that he was, he had allowed his growing fascination with Mrs. Darrell to rule his actions.

"Doom?" Kate smiled waveringly. "Come now, melodrama is not becoming in a gentleman."

Ryder gaped at her. "Melodrama, madam? *Melodrama?*" Surely she understood what happened back there? Understood what he was now expected to do?

"Under the circumstances, I do think you might call me Kathryn, or Kate. Everyone else does."

Her unwavering optimism was absolutely grating. Ryder massaged his temples, trying to understand how she could be so damned cheerful. "Mrs.

Darrell, you don't seem to understand the seriousness of this—"

"Oh, I'm quite certain there will be a great deal to do, but then it will all fade away as all scandals do. I'm a widow with a great deal of money. You are a duke. What harm can truly be done?"

Ryder didn't miss the forced certainty in her voice. Clearly, she did understand that what they had done was not typical. "We were caught cock out, skirts up by the entire—the *entire*—ton."

Kathryn blushed. She cleared her throat and actually had the decency to look sheepish. "Yes, that was rather bad."

"Bad, Mrs. Darrell?"

She smiled and shook her head. "Kathryn."

"As you wish." He blew out a harsh breath.

It was hard to believe the woman was arguing the semantics of first and last names in their situation. "*Bad* does not even begin to encompass the enormity of what has befallen us."

Good God, he could not be in this situation. He could not and should not have to choose between Jane's memory and this madly captivating woman before him. "Catastrophe, madam. That is what we have. We have a bloody catastrophe."

Her confidence slowly dimmed under his tirade. She folded her hands into her lap and glanced out the window. "I realize I have behaved without modesty."

Ryder shifted uncomfortably on his seat. He didn't want her feeling as if he thought badly of her or her behavior. In the end, this truly was his damned fault, but right now he was having a devil of a time getting a hold of his temper. Perhaps because he'd put himself in this wild situation.

"I, myself, shall hardly be canonized any time soon," he said softly. "But that is not the point. The point is we were caught—"

She snapped her gaze to him, and the grey depths stormed with razor sharp intellect. "Make no mistake. I shall not be cowed by this circumstance. I have lived too much of my life in the care of other people's opinion. I will not be coerced into guilt. Anyone in our set would have done exactly as we did. We just happened to be found."

God, she was beautiful in her assurance and determination. And her passion was admirable. Few women would claim their own futures as she had done and remain so bold in the face of the *ton's* displeasure. He had to admit, it had never occurred to him this was truly about freedom for her. He'd merely assumed she'd been repressed sexually, as happened to many wives. This, however, was

different. Kathryn clearly longed for independence. Of every sort. But that she truly thought of herself to be coupled with the likes of him and the people he sinned with?

“Our set?” he asked gently.

“Yes.”

“Madam, you are about as much a part of my set, as a poodle is like to a wolf hound.”

Her eyes narrowed. “That is not a flattering comparison, Your Grace. Though I may have given evidence to the contrary, I am not a silly person and have lived my life with a ridiculous sense of propriety and duty.”

Ryder hesitated. He had given insult by comparing her to such a vapid little beast, but damnation, this was infuriating. “I apologize, but do you realize how utterly ruined you are?”

She opened her mouth ever so slightly, then clapped it shut.

“You are ruined,” he repeated softly but firmly.

She shrugged. “I shall recover.”

“Not in London, you shall not. Not unless you wish to be reduced to the status of an extremely loose woman. No house of any repute will welcome you. It matters not that half the *ton* would have done what you did.”

“It is what is seen that counts,” she whispered.

He nodded. “Exactly.”

Ryder leaned back and wiped a hand over his face. He had never cared so strongly about the fate of a lady he’d involved himself with. His lack of emotional regard to the women he bedded was the only way he had been able to justify being untrue to Jane. He cared for this woman. Too much. “Do you know the only way you can be saved?”

She glared back at him, clearly annoyed he was forcing her to see the cold reality of such a beastly happenstance.

Ryder laced his hands together over his lap. “I am expected to marry you.”

“No, thank you,” she said tightly.

Ryder blinked then braced his hands on his knees and leaned forward. He remained silent for a moment, convincing himself she had indeed just uttered the words, *no* and *thank you* together.

In the first place, every woman in Christendom panted after his dukedom, even though they knew he would never propose. Secondly, he was this woman’s salvation, and she was dismissing him before he’d even told her he wasn’t going to offer. It was—it was damned disconcerting!

She didn't want him? The feeling lacing through his chest was most certainly not disappointment. It was relief. Indeed. It was.

"I beg your pardon," he asked, his voice incredulous to his own ears.

"No, thank you," she said again folding her arms just below her breasts.

Surprised by his own sudden discomfort at her quick rejection, he said, "That was not an offer. Merely a statement of fact."

"Oh." She shifted uncomfortably. "It matters not. I already said no."

Yes, well. It was for the best in any case. Even now, he could recall Jane on their wedding day with perfect accuracy. She'd been full of grace and beautiful, so unlike the day she died.

Ryder swallowed quickly. "So you absolve me from your ruin?" he asked, his own shock ripe in his voice. Any other woman would be screaming that he had forced himself upon her and then shout for the bans to be posted.

"Absolutely."

Before he could stop himself, the word slipped from his lips, "Why?"

"Suffice it to say, I have made the mistake of marriage before." The light in her face faded. "I have no intention on revisiting such an unpleasing happenstance."

"I see." He too had been married.

Like the woman sitting across from, he had no intention of marrying again, but for very different reasons. Memories of Jane invoked such pain, but he welcomed the harsh feeling. He needed to remember she had once lived, walked gently through their home, and lovingly held his hand in the darkest moments of his young life.

Jane. Quiet and kind, her voice had always been a surprise, but he'd listened to her, always valued her opinion. When she'd been taken from him—"Then we are of a like mind," he gruffly pointed out.

"Yes."

He blew out an exhausted breath. "Then there is nothing more to say."

Her gaze lifted to his face, and she looked at him for a long moment, as if willing him to say exactly what she wanted. Alas, he had no idea what the woman was thinking and he couldn't imagine the words that would be perfect to her ears.

"Yes," she said quietly. "There is nothing more to say."

As though on cue, the carriage rolled to a stop before her townhouse, and the footman jumped down and opened the door.

The silence stretched between them for several moments. Finally, Ryder spoke. "I am sorry it ended like this."

She smiled slightly—her angelic, enigmatic smile. "I am only sorry we were unable to finish." With that, she started to step down out of the carriage.

Before Ryder could stop himself, he grabbed her hand, savoring the gentle feel of her and pressed her open palm to his lips. The scent of roses washed over him, and he breathed it in, knowing it might be the last time. "Farewell."

Her hand ever so lightly cupped his cheek then slid away. Mrs. Darrell dashed down the step and up to her townhouse.

She didn't look back.

Ryder found himself hoping she would. It was the most ridiculous notion, but he couldn't help but feel as if he'd let his last chance at happiness climb out of the carriage.

It was a damned foolish thought, and before he could allow it to take root, he slipped Jane's ribbon from his pocket and tied it back around his wrist. He gazed down at it for a moment, his throat tightening. Then he tore his gaze away and pounded on the roof. The coachman cracked the whip, and he rode into the darkness. Where he belonged.



To her absolute irritation, Kate watched the duke's coach rattle away through the window of the salon. She shouldn't really give a fig for his departure, but she did. What was worse, she felt as though her entire spirit was rioting inside her body as if her body was insisting she run out into the night and stop the duke from leaving. That was nonsense, and if she didn't keep a hold of herself the reality of her situation would hurtle her into a tear-ridden mass.

She lifted her hand and pressed it to the cold glass window pane. She could still see his face, rapt with desire for her. It had been the most thrilling moment of her life. He had made her feel utterly beautiful, as if she was the only woman in the world.

But she supposed that was his specialty, for he hadn't even suggested they might see each other again. In fact, his attitude had been firm in his resolve that their relationship should come to an end.

Sighing, Kate pushed herself away from the window and turned to the empty salon. She bit down on her lip, trying to control the nerves shaking within her.

One moment, the man was so charmingly ardent. He'd even protected her from the watchful eyes of the *ton*, sweeping her possessively into his arms.

Then he'd taken it all away. He hadn't whispered one word of reassurance. Perhaps Mrs. Barton was right. In the end, the duke was a man not to be trusted.

Kate bit back a bitter laugh. He hadn't even offered that she might call him by his first name. Well, she'd learned her first real lesson about the *ton*. She was on her own, just like she'd always been. Nothing was going to stop her from doing just as she pleased. She was going to live her life on her own terms.

Certainly, she wasn't going to let the duke or the *ton* stand in her way. After all, a woman of her wealth and determination could find people who would still be willing to enjoy life with her. Those were the people who were worth her time, not those who would run at the sign of danger.

CHAPTER 10

*K*ate was sick of scandal, sin and the papers. In fact, the papers she had so once loved to read were now her enemy, labeling her the most loose of lascivious ladies. She was even more annoyed with the dozens of roses, orchids and flowers she didn't even know the names of piling up at her door.

Apparently, it was now widely considered that she was going to be London's next great courtesan. After all, what else was left to her except banishment to some horrid part of Spain or some Germanic principality? Frankly, she had no liking for beer and kraut. She'd also heard that living in Spain was positively dreary.

So, here in London, in the prison that was now her townhouse, Kate sat at her desk overlooking Green Park and ground her teeth. The letters on her desk were in two convenient piles. One slim stack was full of invitations to what appeared to be orgies. The other, much larger stack, were retractions of invitations she'd already agreed to accept. Ironically, her new gowns arrived just this morning. Piles and piles of morning gowns, tea gowns, walking gowns, evening gowns, ball gowns and even a riding habit had been presented, along with the bill. Apparently, the tradesman were nervous she might skip the country in the middle of the night.

Most likely she wouldn't have the chance to wear the very gowns she had finally been allowed to buy. It was as if the god of propriety was railing at her sinful desire to step away from the pious path.

Worst of all, numerous charities returned her donations citing that they could not accept support from a person of such character. Those letters had nearly undone her. The thought of them even now tightened her throat.

Shaking her head, Kate lifted her quill ready to write a stinging reply to a rather terse letter sent by the Countess of Carmine. What was such a woman doing castigating her? No doubt, the countess was crowing her short burst of popularity in the London set was over. What could one say to such a person? Sod off really seemed the only appropriate reply.

Flinging down her quill, ink splattered on the green felt blotter and creamy letters. Kate sighed. She let her gaze trail to a large bouquet of crimson roses, a

suitable color for her it would seem that had been sent by the Earl of Albany. It appeared a willingness to fling one's skirts up for a bit of sport at the Royal Opera was a universal introduction to the opposite sex.

It could be worse. Truly. She could be under the guardianship of a father or a husband who would fling her into the country to be entertained by cows, sheep and incomparably bad musical performances by the local tradesmen's daughters for her licentious behavior. She plunked her elbow on the table, heedless of the streaked ink and rested her chin on her fist.

The window beckoned. The dratted thing was like an invisible prison wall which permitted her hints of the glorious world of freedom just on the other side. Countless carriages bustled down the street and even from here she could see the riders showing off their finery in the park.

The lords' and ladies' clothes glared in contrast to the green of the trees and lawn, much like the colorful plumage of exotic birds. They flitted about, chattering. And here she was, once again, secluded and apart.

The feeling was all too familiar. The only difference of course was the reason for her imprisonment, and the fact there had been nothing tempting on the other side of her parlor window in Shropshire.

Every now and then, to her chagrin, she fancied she spied the duke charging across the field on a great black hunter or racing down her road in one of those dangerous new curricles. But it was sheer fantasy. Fantasy she wanted to knock herself over the head with for even contemplating.

He probably had not thought a jot about her since their indiscretion. It wasn't as if he had pursued her in the first place. No, she'd been the one to chase.

Perhaps in the grand tradition of the male, that had been her biggest foible. If she hadn't made it so clear she wanted him, he might have pursued *her*. Kate clenched her jaw at the irritating thought. In truth, where did such action leave a lady? It left her waiting that's what, completely dependent on the dundering behavior of the gentleman in question.

The blasted duke had been sure she'd been too good or innocent or however he wanted to name it and only look at her now—the most scandalous lady in London. If she'd left the whole affair up to him, nothing would have happened.

Nothing.

It was a painful proposition that he wouldn't have pursued her and now was unlikely to ever seek her out, seeing as how he hadn't sought her out to begin with. Worse, while she was trapped, hiding away from the accusatory stares of

society, he was no doubt out, laughing with his companions and having a merry time.

She slapped her hand on her desk. One way or the other, she was proving herself to be a fool. Before she'd been silly enough to believe in love, and now she was languishing over the neglect of a man who showered his attention upon women like spring rain over Derbyshire.

It wouldn't do.

Kate's hand trailed over the list Imogen won from Reginald last evening. It seemed the footman provided very stimulating sport for her cousin.

The thing was full of engagements for the next few days. The man, though as hard as steel, seemed to have the social acuity of a butterfly. . . or a wolf after lambs. And he was going out tonight. Or at least, so said Reginald. For there, in bold swipes of ink stood out the Earl of Albany's fete.

Kate snorted. No doubt, the bounder would go, sip champagne all evening and find himself up the skirts of yet another woman. The thought caused her to see red, and her fist balled the paper up into a tiny little crumple.

It was not right he should be free and she imprisoned. The very idea, the notion, the thought he might use his devilish hands upon another. . .

Kate drew in a slow breath to stop the growl ready to escape her throat.

Imogen bustled in through the door at the end of the parlor, a bouquet of red and white roses in her hand. "Can you countenance it? Another one." She thudded it down onto the gilt French table tucked below the window just opposite Kate's desk. It joined ten other bouquets. "One might think we live in a hot house."

Kate smiled. "More like a house of ill repute."

"Oh, please," Imogen drawled, rolling her eyes. "Hardly the case, my dear. There's only one infamous lady here, which doesn't constitute a brothel." She propped a hand on her hip and tilted her head. She gazed upward. "Though perhaps, I count."

"You still have some semblance of virtue," Kate pointed out, though she doubted that would last long if Imogen kept living with her.

Imogen tutted. "I haven't had my virtue since I was a girl of fifteen. The rest is but a well thought out act. Now, how do you feel?" She took a few steps forward. "You don't seem too dispirited."

Kate twisted in her chair, bracing an arm on the carved wooden back. "I refuse to be daunted," she said with a hint of false bravado.

Imogen smiled, though there was definite doubt in her blue eyes. “Nothing like a stiff British upper lip.”

Kate grabbed the stack of invitations from the dozens of gentlemen of society and even a few hostesses. “Why, look at how many people require my company!” She gave the other much larger stack of rejections a hate-filled look. “Despite some people’s prudish ideas.”

“Yeeeeesss,” Imogen said carefully. “But those,” she pointed at the invitation in Kate’s hand, “um, they are a bit, well how shall we say. . . questionable?”

Shaking her head, Kate pinned a determined smile on her face. “I have decided the *ton* is what is truly questionable.”

God, did she sound as mad as she thought? But she had to believe this, she had to cling to any hope or she’d start to cry. And damn and blast, she wouldn’t cry. She’d done enough of that back in Shropshire, and she was done with that whole business.

“Why should I wish to know them if they don’t wish to know me?”

Imogen nodded, but she was eyeing Kate as if she was a skittish mare that might suddenly bolt. “True—”

Kate ignored it and continued on her bold campaign to ignore her own ruin. “And there are many people—”

“Men,” Imogen interjected.

“Yes, men,” she said huffily, “who wish to make my acquaintance.”

She shuffled through the invitations, hastily reading the various names in elegant black ink. Some were engraved with symbols and gold and silver. None of these were people of lower society. They were all extremely prosperous individuals. Her fingers stopped on a particularly beautiful invite. Which just so happened to be the fete her damned duke was attending. Its thick parchment was jet black, trimmed with gold. The ink was also gold.

“This one.”

*His lordship, the Earl of Albany
should like to request
the presence of Mrs. Kathryn Darrell
for an evening of
adventure and refinement
Barridan House
Eleven o’ clock, if you please*

“Yes, I shall accept this one.” Kate tapped it against her fingertips waiting for Imogen to say something. She’d arrive in sweeping glory and show that blasted man that ruined or not, she was not afraid to show her face. Even if she was showing it in a den of iniquity.

As if trying to collect her thoughts, Imogen stared at the window. Finally, she plopped herself down onto the silk embroidered chaise across from Kate. Her lemon yellow skirts slid about her haphazardly.

“Kathryn,” Imogen said slowly. “I do appreciate your good humor over this unfortunate happening, but do you even know who Albany is?”

Kate shrugged. She should know. She’d spent all her time reading about the nobility, but she couldn’t even remember reading a scrap. “An earl, and that’s all that matters, does it not?”

Imogen rubbed her forehead, then sighed. “I suppose, but Kate, know that I simply cannot attend.”

“What? Why?”

“My position is already tenuous, and to attend one of Albany’s parties is fatal for a woman who is already a bit infamous amongst the *ton*.”

“So you’re saying I’m flinging myself from the tea kettle into a boiling pot?”

Imogen laughed, a dry sound. “No, dearest. You’ve tossed yourself into the oven. I do assure you if you attend Albany’s party you shall find yourself in the flames, albeit the delectable flames,” Imogen lowered her chin, “of Hell.”

Kate gasped. If Imogen thought the parties scandalous, then surely they were the very essence of hedonism. A thrill went straight through her, mixed with a sudden dose of unease. “What happens at these parties?”

Imogen shook her head. “I’m not entirely certain, but there is a reputation for bottles upon bottles of wine, unclothed women and a complete lack of virtue.” She smiled. “And a jolly good time.”

And His bloody Grace, the Duke of Darkwell was going to be in the middle of it. Well, Kate was going to see to it that his night was not quite so merry. “I no longer have any virtue to cling to. You understand, don’t you?”

“Yes,” Imogen admitted, though it clearly pained her.

“I refuse to remain in this house another day.” Especially since her partner in sin was free to go about as he pleased. “I shall take a footman, and if at any point I become overly disturbed by their scandalous endeavors, I shall leave at once.”

Imogen stared at her as if Kate had signed herself into Bedlam.

She put the invitation down upon her desk and smoothed her skirts. “The matter is settled.”



Ryder tightened his fist around the long leather reins and spurred his big black hunter on to greater speeds. The horse's powerful muscles worked beneath him with seamless energy as he ate up the earth.

Rain poured down on them in thick sheets, drenching the rough hills and soaking him through to his skin. He didn't give a damn. He felt oblivious to it. Taking danger in hand, he held the reins with one gloved fist and gave the hunter its head. If he fell at such a breakneck speed, he would be dead in an instant. Savoring the risk, Ryder urged the stallion to a reckless pace.

He could go on like this forever, and he'd already been at it for three hours. But no matter how hard he rode, how fast he tore up the earth or the chances he took, he couldn't drive Mrs. Darrell, no, *Kathryn*, from his thoughts. Her name was temptation on his lips, and if he had his way, he would never utter it.

Even now, as he raced across the long green plain, her face beckoned him. Her grey-blue eyes blazed with unfulfilled passion, passion he had barely tasted.

Cursing himself, he whipped his hunter around and they began the long route they'd already covered twice that morning. He was going to ride till he was exhausted, or he'd broken his own neck.

The gate of the hunter rocked his body, but with each thud of the hooves, he heard her name. Kathryn. Kathryn. Kathryn.

He couldn't escape her. Over the last two days, he kept expecting to see her, just as she'd mysteriously popped up wherever he went before the scandal. But she hadn't, and he felt like a fool, looking for her face around every corner. Hell, she probably hadn't left her house since the opera.

Ryder leaned down and snapped the reins into the air. The hunter, taking his cue, let out another burst of speed. The stallion loved it. With his huge and powerful heart they could go on like this almost all day.

And they might.

Everywhere he went people jeered about his latest conquest. The papers had cited it for the last two days. It was too good a bit of gossip to pass over lightly.

Rain battered him from all sides. Ryder tossed his rain-soaked hair back from his face, ignoring the sliding drops that poured down the sides of his cheeks and dripped from his unshaven chin.

Kathryn Darrell had been a kind woman, untouched by the cruelty of the ton until she had met him. Now her life was destroyed. For there was no question,

Kathryn was ruined. Any day now, he was certain he would hear of her departure to the continent.

Gladly, he would accept it.

His chest tightened painfully at the thought, and he swerved his hunter towards a fence. They soared over it. For one brief moment, his thoughts were clear. Free. As soon as they hit the soaked ground, thoughts of her rattled back with full force.

She would leave. She would never wander back into his life. He would keep his vow of devotion to Jane. And never again would Kathryn surprise him with her wit or her stormy eyes as she crossed the room to speak with him. He would forget her.

He would.

CHAPTER II

Kate stood on the threshold of no return, squared her shoulders and marched right over it. Her candy bright pink skirts brushed over the marble floor, and she drew in a steadying breath.

The home was immense.

Apparently, the Earl of Albany was not only a man addicted to depravity, but was also one of the wealthiest men in London. A very dangerous combination. She'd read in Debrett's that he held one of the oldest titles. Which was probably why the man could do exactly as he pleased.

Green granite columns towered in the entry way, and above her head was a fantastical glass ceiling. If the sun had been shining it would have rioted with color.

As it was, the room was fairly dark. Only a few candles illuminated the darkness. Which struck her as a bit odd, because if the duke was so wealthy, he should have no trouble affording a well-placed candelabra here or there.

The butler, a young man with silver blond hair and warm eyes took her cloak. He gave her a slow smile. "It is a pleasure, Mrs. Darrell. His Lordship will be *most* pleased."

Would he indeed? This, while the butler himself glanced her up and down as if she was a bit of fine flesh? If the butler felt the inclination to be this forward, what would the guests be like?

Kate nodded at the man as she tried to sneak a glance at the only open doorway at the back of the room behind the set of mahogany stairs that twisted round to the floors above.

The butler pointed a white gloved finger at it. "Just through there, madam. Your footman, of course, can wait in our kitchens."

She glanced back at Gregory wondering if she should keep the man by her side. It would be highly unusual to take him, but she had no idea what exactly she was getting herself into. The last thing she wanted was to be caught in a circle of libertines with no defense. "Actually, he provides me with irreplaceable services and shall be accompanying me."

The butler smiled then raked his honey brown eyes over Gregory. “Whatever pleases you, madam. The more the merrier.”

Kate’s eyes widened, and she nearly tripped as she took a step forward. Were they all going to have sex together? The servants and the lords alike all in one happily squirming group?

The urge to march right back out of the earl’s home did a little dance inside her, but she’d made up her mind and there was no turning back. For now. After all, she had plans. Plans to thwart Darkwell in his pursuit of pleasure.

She sauntered forward, her skirts in hand, and glanced back over her shoulder, happy for the presence of the big servant behind her. “Do stay close,” she whispered.

Unlike the cheeky butler, Gregory nodded, his manners superb even though he surely knew they were heading into some sort of sporting house. Kate stepped into a long corridor. It was empty, and she glanced right to left and then squinted into the shadowy darkness. Either she was very early or very late. But the invitation had said eleven.

The rich Oriental rug of blue and gold muffled her footsteps, and the matching pale blue silk walls were absolutely beautiful. Gilt mirrors hung along the sides, reflecting the scant light in the sconces placed sparingly along the walls.

With every step she spotted another vision of herself. It was surprisingly disconcerting as if she was an observer of her own leap into sin. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes wide with apprehension. Gregory on the other hand looked downright fascinated. She threw him a reproachful glance, and he coughed.

Though she’d spent little time in London, she’d never heard of anything like this. Where in heaven’s name was everyone? Music drifted towards them from the end of the hall, and to her relief, she spotted a doorway.

When she reached the end of the hall, she stopped. The opening led to a set of stairs that headed down into an amber glow. Laughter and the hum of voices mixed with the sounds of dance music wafted upward.

What was this, some sort of metaphorical plunge into Hell?

A servant stepped out of a small nook to the left. Kate jumped. “Good gracious, man!”

“Pardon, Mrs. Darrell, I take it you are new to the Devil’s Dance?”

She gaped at him. The what? “The. . .?”

“The Devil’s Dance,” the servant supplied cheerfully. “Please descend.”

He stood to the side, gesturing to the black hole, that depending upon one's point of view, either led to endless pleasure or a personal audience with the prince of darkness himself.

Kate started to laugh, but it was downright nervous even to her ears. She glanced at Gregory and found him staring back. A positively concerned look creasing his features.

Well, she'd already caused a massive scandal, so what was one more?

Taking both courage and her skirts in hand, Kate started down the stairs. Her eyes eventually adjusted to the barely lit darkness. With every step, her heart slammed in to her ribs, for she had no idea what she'd find. But as her foot touched the last step, she turned to face the open doorway at the bottom and nearly fumbled flat on her face.

The room was a packed fairy land of sin. Tiny candles were deposited sporadically throughout the room. They floated in the air from little glass boats hanging from the mirrored ceiling. Everything seemed to reflect the hundreds of little star lights. The walls were panels of gold embellished mirrors. They reflected everyone, allowing the guests to watch themselves and each other. . . and their lack of attire.

The first thing that was immensely clear was that she was inappropriately dressed or, perhaps, overdressed was a more accurate interpretation. Her pink moiré gown was hardly modest. In fact, she'd purposefully pulled the neckline as far down as she dared and had her maid lace her corset especially tight so her breasts were two plump rounds pressed tightly together.

Kate glanced down at her own gown then back to the women. She looked like a Methodist's daughter compared to the company.

A rainbow of color had descended upon the room then there were the styles. Women wore gowns with mere strips of fabric for sleeves. A few didn't have sleeves at all, only tightly laced bodices which barely, or didn't entirely, cover their nipples. Their skirts were travesties. Oh, they still had the suitable fullness which hid the shape of the hips, but the exposed underskirts were made of the sheerest of materials so one could see directly through to the women's embroidered stockinged thighs!

Clearly the French had inspired the fashion.

Her slippered foot refused to go through the doorway. Oh, no, she needed to brace herself first.

Kate gulped as she spotted one woman in a wine red gown, her dark, curled head turned towards a gentleman. The glimmering fabric poured over the

underskirt and was tucked to the sides about three quarters down as current fashion dictated with white roses and diamond broaches. There was only one true aberration from modern fashion.

Kate blinked as if that might somehow cause the shocking sight before her to disappear. Goodness, the woman wore no underskirt! The bodice descended in a v to the point where her hips and thighs met. Even so, she wore a pair of strange little crimson silk pants with ruffles about her upper thighs. Her crimson stockings stretched up to her mid-thigh. Red velvet ribbons and diamond buckles held them in place.

What kind of woman would wear. . .

Mrs. Barton turned towards her, and her eyes lit with pleased recognition. Thank God, there was someone to guide her through the land of lewdness. Then again, Mrs. B might volunteer to be her personal guide to delights unsampled.

The actress snapped her golden fan open and started in her direction.

Kate smiled what she hoped was a bold smile. Unfortunately, she was fairly sure it was a brittle mockery of a grin. But if Mrs. Barton could thrive in this crowd, Kate could, even if it was only for the purpose of making the duke's night one he wouldn't soon forget.

Mrs. Barton strode forward, her long legs made even longer by a pair of extremely high red shoes decked with golden flowers and bows.

As if pulling a cork from a bottle, Mrs. Barton took her hand and pulled her through the door. "Welcome, my dear, to a life you have no doubt ever imagined."

"Err. . ." Kate took Mrs. Barton's arm and strode into the dark ballroom with her. "Thank you."

"I am delightfully surprised you took up Lord Albany's invitation." Mrs. Barton's eyes twinkled as she glanced down at her. "I did sense a need for freedom in you."

Freedom? Right. Though not from clothing. . . Kate nodded like a puppet.

"Women in the *ton* can never truly be free," Mrs. Barton proclaimed confidently. "They have too many people to please."

"But you attend ton parties all the time," Kate ventured, feeling a bit as if she'd been tossed into the middle of a mad, though beautiful, circus.

Artfully, Mrs. Barton wove through the tightly knit groups of gossipers, a queen amongst the revelers. "True. But you see, I have never been truly of the *ton* so I they do not hold me to its rules. I am a novelty." She paused and her lips twisted. "Rather like a trained monkey who bangs a pair of symbols, I add an air

of naughtiness to their nauseatingly proper world. I put up with them because it's good for my business. I am nothing if not a business woman."

"An actress is always upon the stage, is she not?"

Mrs. Barton threw back her dark head, the red feathers in the black curls bouncing as she laughed. The rich sound turned the heads of half a dozen men who stared at her with unconcealed appreciation. "You, my dear, are a treasure of honesty."

"Yes," Kate said dryly. "A rather annoying quality, I admit."

"I beg to differ." Mrs. Barton waved her fan at the people surrounding them. "These pompous peacocks could use a dose of truth, and coming from such a pleasing creature as you, they'll listen to anything you say."

As they wove through the wide skirts of the women, Kate nibbled on her lower lip. Her gaze darted right to left trying to take in the sights. Dozens of couples danced in the middle of the floor. A full orchestra played a tune that seemed to be encouraging the dancers to do things they oughtn't do. In fact, she'd never heard such music, nor did she recognize the steps the couples danced. The couples were close, their hands about each other.

"What is that?" she hissed.

"That my dear, is a marvelous dance quite popular in Venice and originated in Vienna. They've been doing it for a decade, and it's danced quite publicly throughout many parts of Europe."

"What is it called?"

Mrs. Barton sighed. "A waltz. It's not permitted at parties here. Only we English would make such a fuss about a little dance."

"Oh." Kate followed Mrs. Barton as if she was a well-trained sheep, but she was lucky to have the woman's arm, for no doubt she would have ended up flat on her face, due to her inability to focus on anything but the mad scenes before her. Still, she found herself scanning the faces, looking for a dark profile.

His profile.

Mrs. Barton paused and tapped a gentleman on the shoulder. The chestnut-haired fellow smiled at her. His shirt was scandalously untied and open at the neck. His hair was loose, brushing the tops of his shoulders. Without question, he reached into a pocket and pulled out a silver case. He handed Mrs. Barton what appeared to be a long, slender dark stick, then placed the case back into his pocket. He bent and very softly kissed her breast.

Laughing, Mrs. Barton swatted him away and continued marching forward. She stopped at a candle, placed the tip of the dark stick into the flame and drew

upon the other end with her mouth. Kate watched with fascination as smoke curled up into the air, and Mrs. Barton held the thing between two slender fingers.

“He’s not here yet.”

“Who?” Kate asked, her voice dripping with feigned innocence.

“Please my dear, there’s no need to dissemble. I’d be out for a bit of mischief myself if I’d been caught like you and the good duke.” Mrs. Barton stopped at a long table covered in every possible pastry one could imagine.

To Kate’s shock, many of them looked like variations on women’s breasts. In the center were dozens of crystal glasses filled with a pink liquid.

Mrs. Barton picked up two glasses and shoved one straight into Kate’s hands. The actress drew a long puff of smoke then blew it slowly out of the side of her mouth. “My dear, it truly is a shame about the other night.”

“Mmm,” Kate agreed as she drank. She sputtered at the strength of it though it was really quite good. Sweet and bubbly, it raced down her throat like candied fire. She took a deep sip and didn’t utter another word. Really, she had no wish to discuss the other night.

“Who would have thought the torch bearer would be such an idiot as to stumble upon a pig running across the stage? I tell you the opera is the most preposterous thing.”

That was how the fire had started? Kate’s tryst with Darkwell had been dashed to an end by a brainless torchbearer and a ne’er-do-well pig? She guzzled down half her glass, and after a moment, noticed the number of couples who kept going in and coming out from a series of curtained archways at the back of room. She pointed and opened her mouth to speak.

“No, no, my dear,” Mrs. Barton whispered, grabbing Kate’s hand and lowering it to her side. “No need to point at the obvious.”

“But what’s—”

Mrs. Barton arched a dark brow, and Kate just stopped short of smacking herself for own blundering. Apparently, debauchment didn’t quite make one worldly.

“Precocious plunges into deep waters are hardly agreeable to one’s health, and I do think you’ve already taken more than enough plunges for one week. Perhaps you should ease into these waters.”

Kate couldn’t argue with her there. In some ways, she couldn’t believe she’d launched herself straight into such a wild group just to see the duke again. But

here she was, and anticipating was singing through her veins, along with the sweet punch.

Mrs. Barton tossed back the contents of her drink then scanned the room. Her face lit, and she snapped her fingers.

What the devil was she doing? But before Kate could ask, a heartbreakingly beautiful man made his way towards them. He strode through the crowd like a young Adonis rising from the sea. Despite the fact she had Darkwell embedded in her thoughts, her mouth dried at his sheer beauty.

His cheekbones were two slashes above a chiseled jaw, and his long russet hair shone with copper tints. Piercing, jade green eyes roamed from Mrs. Barton to Kate like a man trying to pick which sweet he wanted to devour first. It made her positively nervous. His perfect, white shirt was open at the throat exposing well developed muscles and a smooth chest. Black breeches clung to his thighs. Clearly the man rode a great deal, which only led her to wonder what he might do with such strong legs at his disposal.

She had to admit he was a great deal prettier than Darkwell, but that very fact made him less interesting. For all his astounding masculinity, he lacked the rough edges her duke possessed.

The man stopped before them, towering over them both at well over six feet. He extended his bare hand to her, and Kate placed her fingertips out for him to take. Smiling slowly, like a languorous cat luring its prey into its patient grasp, he took her hand and turned it over. He lingered over her wrist, his soft, warm breath caressing her skin. Then he pressed the barest of kisses upon her exposed wrist, skimming the flesh. She had to stop herself from snapping her hand back. It was positively delicious, yet felt completely wrong.

“Madam,” he purred, his voice low and rippling with some accent.

Mrs. Barton smiled on with approval. “Mrs. Darrell, I am pleased to introduce Count Svenden.” She teased the tip of her closed fan down the man’s muscled chest. “He doesn’t speak a word of English, but I promise, he has other talents.”

Kate didn’t have to guess at what this fellow excelled at. The man’s mouth was an invitation to the most decadent of pleasures. Clearing her throat, she pulled her hand back. “Lovely to meet you, Count.” She glanced around. “So. . . What brings you here?”

Mrs. Barton rolled her eyes. “Speaking to a man who doesn’t speak your language is a waste. Try one of his true talents.”

Kate glared at the woman who was fast becoming her tutor in temptation.

“Dance with him,” Mrs. Barton said as if that was her only intent on introducing her to the young Casanova.

“I don’t know the steps,” Kate protested. Even if she did, she wasn’t about to let herself be wrapped up by this Germanic Adonis. He might try to sweep her off into one of the other rooms and that was a talent of his she didn’t wish to test. As infuriating as Darkwell was, he was the only one she wanted.

“It matters not.” Mrs. Barton eyed Svenden who stood waiting patiently. “He’s a master teacher at guiding women’s bodies.”

“I have no doubts,” Kate drawled, and with the resignation of one being led to the block stuck out her hand and let the devil lead her to the dance floor.

CHAPTER 12

Ryder stumbled straight into a golden candelabra. He winced as its heavy, sculpted metal bit into his black silk-covered shin. The massive piece didn't move a jot.

There was no denying it, even as pain shot through his leg. There was a woman in a bright pink gown, the silk shining under the dim light, whirling around the floor in the arms of a damn fop. And that woman was the blasted torment of his days and nights.

"Good god, man! How much have you had to drink?" Hunt demanded, clapping him on the shoulder.

"Not enough," Ryder gritted. He righted himself, spotted a gold liveried servant swooping by with a silver tray of drinks. Without ado, he snatched up a crystal flute of champagne and tossed the contents down in one swallow.

"You're on your way now." Hunt arched a dark brow, staring at him as if he'd suddenly gone mad.

Ryder barely listened to him as he contemplated breaking the glass just to take the sudden edge of insane disbelief and fury throttling through him. He couldn't take his eyes off her. Kathryn Darrell waltzed—*waltzed*—across the floor with amazing grace, her pink skirts swishing, her softly curled hair decked with white flowers, brushing her neck and slender back.

The man—no, the *bastard*—guiding her loomed over her, clearly enjoying his tempting view.

And she!

She was smiling.

At another man.

The very thought was. . . Well, it was bloody horrifying. Worse, it was horrifying that it was horrifying.

He was not supposed to feel this raging possessiveness, but whether he should or not, he did.

Hunt tapped him on the shoulder, his gaze directed in Kathryn's swirling direction. "If smoke could curl from your nostrils, it would do so."

Ryder ground his teeth down. She thought she could just throw herself into his world without knowing the dangers, did she? She thought she could just leap to another man and a worse scandal. Had the woman no sense of self-preservation? Had she been gallivanting about with more men and more parties while he'd spent the last three days with a gin bottle and what Hunt insisted on calling *angst*?

Ryder thrust the champagne glass at Hunt. "Hold this."

Hunt grasped the thing, his lips pursing into a frown. "Consider what you're about to do—"

"Silence. Absolute silence," Ryder snapped.

Hunt's lips twisted with annoyance. "I shan't weep at your funeral."

Ryder threw him a blistering stare then blew out a sharp breath. Ryder had no idea what he was about to do, but he damn well was going to do something.

The mass of dance couples noted his bizarre presence amongst them, many of the ladies turning their lascivious glances upon him. A few of the men glared, sensing that blood was about to fly.

His throat started to close as he spotted the bastard and Kathryn. The fop had his hand on the lowest part of her back and her chin was tilted up, her face merry.

Enough.

Her smiles were meant for him, not any jackanapes who might twirl her about the dance floor. He didn't care if that sounded completely ridiculous.

Ryder marched up to her partner, grabbed his white silk covered shoulder and pushed him back from Kathryn.

The man's green eyes flared then narrowed. "*Was?*" he growled in German.

Of course he had to be Germanic.

"*Arschloch.*"

Ryder was not entirely sure what gibberish was filtering from the man's ridiculously sensual lips. Fat lips, in truth. But he knew an insult when he heard one. "*Arschloch*, indeed. In England, we'd say you're a tosspot's git." To emphasize this, Ryder curled his hand and pumped it up and down, keeping a pointed gaze on the ass. "Tosspot, you see?"

Kathryn tottered back from the sudden dislodgement from her dance partner and at Ryder's rude gesture. Her stormy eyes widened as she stared at him. Then she blinked quickly as she took him in.

Ryder glanced at her, drinking in the sight of beautiful pale skin, furious eyes and gorgeous blonde hair.

Firmly, he pointed at her and skewered the bastard with his stare. "Mine," he snapped, then for emphasis, pointed to himself and then at Kathryn again. "Miiiiine." Hauling his fist back, Ryder let it fly. His knuckles smashed the younger man's chin and the idiot staggered.

"What are you doing?!" Kathryn screamed.

The fop shook his blond head then squared his shoulders, ready for a fight.

"That's it, you poncy-assed bastard." Ryder nodded, lifting his fists. "Come and get it, *Mein Herr*."

"Ja?" the bloke intoned, his face indignant. "*Kommen sie hier*."

The guttural language filled the sudden silence as the entire room stared at the fight breaking out. Ryder caught sight of them in their various states of attire, forming an oddly shaped circle around the blossoming brawl.

"Pardon me!" Kathryn cut in, her hands propped upon her hips. "I was having a splendid dance."

Ryder gaped. Marveling at her audacity, he swung his gaze to her. "Splendid dance?" he echoed.

She narrowed her eyes and took a step towards him. "Yes," she hissed. "Now hie off." A smile, that damn enigmatic smile, tilted her lips as she mocked him. "Count Svenden is an excellent dancer. I have yet to find him disappointing."

Ryder sucked in a breath. Was she inferring *he* was a disappointment. She—She—Hell! He had no idea what to think. But he was damn well going to show her there was nothing disappointing about the Duke of Darkwell. "I am not about to leave you in the arms of this lecher."

She snorted, her arms folding over her beautiful breasts. "Given our scandal, and its rather underwhelming conclusion, I believe I would rather bet on the count here for satisfaction."

Frustration mixed with a good dose of anger rendered him temporarily speechless.

The count lowered his fists and held out a hand to Kathryn, his eyes turning soft with heat and blatant invitation. "*Kommen sie, meine Liebster. Lasst uns Liebe machen, ja?*"

Kathryn gave Ryder a challenging grin, her gaze locked with his as she lilted, "I have no idea what you said, count, but I would love to."

Ryder snapped his mouth shut. She had no idea if she was agreeing to milk a cow or to milk the count! Yet, just to spite him, she was going to do it. Well, there was no way in Hell he was letting that happen.

As she extended her slender hand to the Germanic idiot, Ryder snapped, his voice so low he hardly credited it as his own, "The hell you say."

Her arms fell to her sides, and her cheeks flared with heat at his gruff tone. "I beg your—"

Ryder marched up to her, ignoring the fact he was acting like a complete Neanderthal, and grabbed her hand. "If you're going anywhere, it's with me."

"You sent me on my way, if you recall," she bit out.

"A mistake I intend to remedy. We are settling this." He glanced down at her soft lips. Gripped by a complete lack of reason, he yanked her to him. "Now."

Lowering his lips to hers, he devoured her mouth as if it was the last thing he'd ever taste. God, it was sweet. Sweet with wine and desire, and anger.

Her body tensed against his then her hands gripped his shoulders. Before he could think otherwise, he swept her up in his arms, cradling her against his chest.

There was a general moment of shocked silence and then applause burst around them, accompanied by whistles.

"I wish it was me," a lady in daffodil yellow sighed.

"Well it's *me*," Kathryn said possessively, her hands curling into the silk of his black shirt.

Her words echoed though his head like a stunning gong. She wanted him. Just as much as he did. There was no question, and he nearly missed a step at the realization. In that moment, everything vanished. Completely focused on the heat between him and the woman in his arms, he strode through the crowded ballroom to the gilded arches leading to the private rooms. He had fought so hard against his hunger for her, but now nothing was going to stop him from fulfilling both of their desires.



Kate stood on the edge of a precipice not entirely sure if she jumped what would happen. Right now, she might either soar with absolute happiness or it was very probable she might crash upon the perilous rocks below.

God help her, she was falling in love with a brute. A brute who had knocked Count Sveren in the jaw and then swept her up into his arms as if she belonged to him and no other. So, yes, he was certainly a brute, but even so, her heart thrilled preposterously at the romantic moment.

Indeed, it felt so wonderful to be in his arms, she had to recall his heart was not open. She would not be a fool and throw herself blindly at love again. Never

again would she risk her own happiness. Nor could she ignore the need for him humming through her veins. She pushed her concerns away, focusing instead on the feel of his superfine coat beneath her fingertips.

“Why did you do that?” she asked, her voice, much to her irritation, a breathy wisp.

Ryder strode through an open gilt door then kicked it shut behind him. Gently, he lowered her to her slippered feet. “Because it infuriated me to see you in his arms.”

She let out a frustrated laugh, resting her hands against his beautifully muscled chest. A chest she very much wanted naked for her exploration. It was so strong, and she loved the feel of him beneath her fingers. “You are a most confusing man.”

“I know,” he said gently. Ryder lifted his fingers and ever so gently traced them down his cheek. “There is one thing I am not confused about.”

“Oh, yes?” she whispered, hating herself for loving his touch so much.

His thumb traced over her lower lip, and his gaze fixed on her mouth. “I cannot cease thinking about you.”

If she’d been confused by his actions before, now she was positively dazed. Only days ago, he’d claimed they would never see each other again. Yet, here he was proclaiming she was always in his thoughts. It was damned tempting to ignore the questions rioting through her and simply suck his teasing thumb into her wet mouth. But she needed answers. “Do explain.”

“Since the opera, I have worked beyond all measure to remove you from my thoughts, but it is impossible.” He let his mouth hover above hers, his arm circling her waist. “I dream of your lips beneath mine, my hands cupping your breasts, of your sweet pussy welcoming me.”

Kate’s cheeks flashed with heat. Lord, his words alone were lighting her afire. Already, she could feel the wet need between her thighs that begged for his sex.

“Of course,” he murmured, easily guiding her back into the room, near the divan artfully placed for ardent lovers, “there is the fact we were so rudely interrupted the other night.”

Kate turned her head away, sucking in a slow breath. She was virtually demanding her own heartbreak. Her heart was begging her to let it love this man, but she knew all too well the folly of such urgings. She licked her lips, contemplating whether or not she could make love to him without letting a piece

of her heart belong to him. For if she gave just the smallest of pieces, she would be doomed to give them all.

It was how her ridiculous heart worked.

His hips gently leaned into her waist, his hard length pressing through her skirts. A promise of the ecstasy he could give her. "Come, let me make love to you."

She turned back to him, gazing up into his jet colored eyes. The room seemed to expand around them, and her blood pulsed hot and hungry. Good lord, he was handsome, and he smelled of spice and blood oranges. She let herself drink in his scent and couldn't help but recall. . . "You have never even said my name."

His brows furrowed, and he cocked his head, his dark hair caressing his forehead boyishly. "*Kathryn*," he whispered. "Beautiful, lovely, *Kathryn*." He lifted one hand so it gently caressed her neck and slid to her nape. He murmured against her lips. "Let me pleasure you, *Kathryn*."

Her name on his lips was her undoing. Her body softened into his, and she offered herself up, ready to be taken in any way they might imagine, as many times as they might desire. "Make love to me." It was half demand, half pleading.

But whatever it was, his chest rose and fell in a swift breath and he groaned. "As my lady commands."

Kate grasped his back, and he pulled her tightly to him as he pressed open mouth kisses along her throat, nipping then smoothing the roughened skin with his lips. Shudders ran through her body, racing straight between her thighs.

Suddenly, he moved back then spun her around so her hips were cradled against the bulge in his breeches and her back was curved to his hard chest.

"*Kathryn*," he said softly. "You make me forget everything when I'm with you." He placed his strong hands against her waist then ever so slowly dragged them up her bodice, cupping her breasts through the silk of her gown and boning of her corset. "I cannot recall a single reason why I should not make love to you when I hold you like this." He traced his hands up her shoulders and tilted her head forward, exposing the back of her neck.

"Only you," he whispered against her neck. "Only you." He lowered his head and gently bit her neck bit. Kate gasped and jerked against him, astonished that such touches could drive her so wild.

As he lavished her with kisses, his hands stroked the smooth rounds of her breasts then worked down.

Kate moaned, tilting her face towards her shoulder. Following her lead, Ryder took her chin in one hand and kissed her mouth, slipping his tongue between her lips. Hungrily, she suckled him.

With his free hand, he stroked down the front of her gown then pressed against the place where her thighs met.

Kate groaned against his mouth, her hands desperate to touch him, and she clasped at his arms.

Ryder circled his fingers over her mound, and she dropped back against him, her head resting against his hard chest. Pressure and need began to wind through her and she pulled her lips from his, desperately needing a deep breath.

Ryder let out a harsh breath then moved them forward. "Lean against the divan."

"The divan?" she asked, already drunk on pleasure.

Guiding her, he said lowly, "Brace your hands on the arm and back."

She blinked, but followed his instructions. At the feel of his hands guiding her legs up onto the soft cushions, leaving her bottom up towards him, she sucked in a quick breath.

As though she'd been completely distracted by their passion before, Kathryn noticed the mirrors hanging on the walls around them. Reflections of her, kneeling, her breasts pushed tight against her bodice, and Ryder standing behind her surrounded them. Her mouth opened slightly, and she dug her fingers into the blue brocaded divan.

He glanced up and smiled, his eyes darker than they had ever been as he lightly took her skirts in his hands. Ever so slowly, he dragged them up over her legs, bunching them at her waist. Kate swallowed, completely unsure of what he was about to do. She felt utterly exposed, her legs only covered by the sheerest silk and matching pink garters.

His fingers whispered over her ankles. "You are so beautiful," he crooned, as his hands worked upward, massaging her calves.

The tips of his fingers were firm through her silk stockings, and when he reached her bare thighs, his touch softened. Ever so lightly, he traced his fingertips up the backs of her thighs and to her bottom. He swept his hands over the rounds of her bum, parting her thighs even further with a nudge of his knee.

Swallowing back a good dose of shock, and focusing on the anticipation throbbing inside her, Kate tried to catch what he was doing in the mirror. His dark head lowered, and his mouth pressed to her lower back. With his hands cupping her hips, Ryder kissed the rounds of her bottom and moved down with

infuriating slowness until he tilted her hips up high, exposing the soft folds of her sex.

A satisfied sigh escaped his lips when he slipped his fingers into the already wet folds. Kate jerked at the sudden intense pleasure and tilted her hips even higher, not knowing exactly what he was going to do with her.

“I’ve wanted to taste you for so long.”

Taste?

Then his mouth was on her hot folds, sucking them lightly into his mouth. A moan escaped her lips, and she shuddered with delight. The tip of his tongue traced her nub, swirling it as if it was the sweetest candy and his finger, oh lord, his finger slid into her core, probing her, matching the tempo of his tongue.

Groaning, Kate dropped her forehead to rest on the cool silk of the divan. Her body was wild with desire, and she was certain she was shattering apart. Just as she was sure he couldn’t take anymore, he sucked harder on her little nub and thrust another finger inside her.

She cried out as wave after wave of pleasure pulsed through her. Her arms shook and her thighs trembled, but he didn’t relent until she was collapsed against the back of the divan, panting.

“We’re not done, darling,” he said, his voice as low and rough as gravel. His hands took her hips and turned her.

Her skirts twisted wildly, and she pulled at them frantically, desire for him already building like heated coals.

Roughly, he reached down and dragged her hips down the length of the divan so her feet were resting on the floor. He parted her thighs with one hand.

Greedily, Kate reached up, working at the fastenings of his breeches. Her fingers fumbled, but she managed to free him. Her breath came in shallow, fast bursts as she reached in and took his hard penis from the restrictive clothing. Her eyes widened, surprised again, at how large he was. The tall shaft was erect, reaching towards his belly button. The small slit was wet with a small drop of dew. Instinctively, Kate reached out and rubbed it over the head.

Ryder groaned, his hips tensing. “God, I want to be inside you.”

Kate glanced up at him, and their eyes met for a moment. “Don’t wait.”

The world totally disappeared, and all she could see was him as he lifted her legs up and wrapped them around his waist.

For a moment, he teased the head of his cock against her opening, and Kate groaned, biting down on her lower lip. And then he thrust deep to the hilt. Kate’s

eyes flared wide, and she drew in an astonished breath. The feeling was so deep and perfect she could hardly think.

Then he began to move, his hips rolling as he stroked her body with his cock in long hard thrusts. His hands held her hips firmly up and in place. Kate reached up and grabbed his muscled forearms, her nails digging into his skin through his silk shirt. For what seemed like minutes and a moment at the same time, he thrust, circling his hips again and again, driving her higher and higher. Though gripped by a growing pressure where their bodies met, Kate couldn't tear her gaze from Ryder's face. It was a mask of desire, his face flushed, and his lids half closed.

And just as she was sure neither of them could resist, he moved one hand and pressed his fingers to her nub, circling her slick desire over the sensitive spot.

Kate's hands tightened on his arm, her mouth opening and she moaned, "Oh, yes. Yes, Ryder."

At her words, his entire body began to tense and abruptly he pulled out. Ryder groaned his hot seed spilling on her stomach. His knees bent, and he leaned over her, slowly letting her legs fall to the floor.

They both drew in several breaths. Her body liquid, and drifting in unbelievable satisfaction, Kate reached for him. He lowered himself and gently tucked her in beside him as they laid down on the divan, her body spooned against his.

They remained silent, and Kate stared down at the blue and gold carpet. The pleasure slowly ebbed away, and she began to dread the next moments. The moments where they would have to speak. He didn't wish to hurt her, she knew it. But he would send her on her way, just as he had done before. And she would be a fool if she hoped for anything else.

Even though he had just given her more pleasure than she had ever known, she was still in the same scandalous position she was when they left the opera. He wasn't going to offer to marry her. And she didn't want him to.

He would never love her and she knew, though it tore at her to admit, sex was the only thing he could ever give, because he could never give his heart.

It belonged to someone else.

And his body. . . to Kathryn's shock, was not enough.

His breath was gentle against the top of her head, and his strong arm cradled her. And yet, it was time for her to go. Kathryn closed her eyes for a moment, promising herself she wouldn't cry. She thought she had stopped believing in love when Percy Darrell trampled her heart. But she'd been wrong.

Somewhere deep down in her heart, she still had believed in love and that happiness waited somewhere for those who reached for it, but when Ryder brought her in to this room, he'd spoken only of desire. And now, well, now it was time for her to give up the hopes of those dreams.

CHAPTER 13

“I’ve never felt anything like that before,” Ryder breathed, barely able to think let alone speak.

God, she felt so good against him. This moment was better than any moment he’d in the years since Jane. He blinked at the thought of his young wife, a wife who’d given him so much, and the pleasure of the moment began to dim.

Kathryn laughed softly. “I find that hard to believe, but thank you.”

There was just the slightest hint of pain in her voice, and Ryder hated it. He pushed himself up onto an arm and gazed down at her face. “Kathryn, I have never known a woman like you nor known the kind of pleasure you have just given me.”

She pressed her lips together and blinked. Gently, she laced her hands into his hair and brought his lips down to hers. Exchanging, warm kisses, Ryder allowed himself to take pleasure in just the smallest touch of her. After a moment, he pulled back, staring down at her rosy mouth and storm-filled eyes.

How in the hell was he going to continue as before? Now that he had allowed himself to enjoy her beautiful body and equally passionate mind, how could he go back to his cool control? And there was the matter of her ruin. But marriage. He still didn’t know. He’d promised himself so fervently to never break faith with Jane. And yet, Kathryn. . .

Ryder swallowed trying to understand the emotions ripping through him. “Kathryn, I—”

“No.” Her voice was soft yet firm as iron.

“No?” he said, a touch of astonishment lightening his voice.

She shook her dark head, the curls brushing against his shoulder. “Please don’t speak. This has been perfect, and I wish to keep it a memory to cherish.”

Ryder’s mouth snapped closed, and he stared up at the cream and gold ceiling. This couldn’t be happening. It seemed utterly impossible, laughable even. For, he knew what words she would say next. He said them often enough. To enough women.

“I will always treasure what we’ve had, but. . .” Her voice trailed off into a rough whisper.

Though inexperienced, Kathryn was a master already at the love affair. “I understand.” It was ironic that he’d just begun to hate himself for letting her effect his heart, and here she was handing his care back to him in a pretty little package of empty words.

“I’m glad,” she said, propping herself onto her pale elbow. “I hope we shall remain friends.”

He swallowed, his eyes wide and burning as he continued to stare at the ceiling. God, it was like hearing himself. Is this how the women he attempted to solace after their extremely brief affairs felt? If so, he should have been shot years ago. Hell, he felt as if a pugilist had slammed an iron fist into his unprotected gut.

“Of course,” he muttered. “If ever you should need anything.”

She pushed herself up. She gazed down at him, blocking his view. Her beauty was damn painful. Golden hair spilled down her back in tangled curls and crushed flowers. Worse, she gave him a cheeky smile.

When he reached up and stroked the smooth skin of her cheek, her eyes glowed with an unusual sheen, and she looked away quickly. “Thank you for being so understanding,” she said, edging to the side of the couch. “I’m certain if ever I am in trouble, you would be the first to fly to my aid and do it with great panache.”

On a complete impulse, his hand curved around her waist holding her to him. Kathryn shook her head with a sadly playful toss, then tried to stand. Ryder couldn’t help himself. If he let her go, that would be the end. She would be gone from his life. And they would never be friends. Lovers so seldom ever were after they parted. Blowing out a harsh breath, he pulled her back against him.

She laughed, a hollow sound. “Am I your captive then?”

“Certainly.” He pressed his face to her side, savoring her scent. It was the last time he would ever be so close to her. “I shall never let you go.” The words hung between them as false as any of his claims at honor.

Turning towards him, her smile was tight, as if she was playing the part of a lighthearted lady of pleasure. Caressing her fingers down the side of his face, she leaned down and pressed a quick kiss to his lips then stood.

Silent now, she righted her clothes, yanking the heavy skirts to the floor. Her fingers touched her hair, and when she clearly felt the jumbled mess, she let her hands fall to her sides. For a moment, she looked like a little girl who had a very merry time at a party and was now unwillingly readying herself to go home.

His jaw tightening and his chest clenching at the sight of the innocence still touching her in this moment, Ryder could barely stand it. He forced himself to lay back. There was no way in hell he was going to be a party to this ugly ritual of leaving. It was impossible to let the lies slip through his lips tonight or go through the motions he had done with so many other women.

Not with her. And it was killing him to see her do it.

His beautiful angel was fast on her way to becoming the accomplished woman of freedom she had so longed to be. And whoever would have thought it could hurt so much?

Trying to appear at ease, he curled his arm behind the back of his head and watched her. If he studied her carefully enough, he could brand every move she made in his brain so he might take it out later and go over it. Just to torture himself with her memory.

Sighing, she turned to him. Her chest expanded in a big intake of breath. A smile brightened her face. It was as if she was inflating herself with artificial joviality. "It has indeed been a pleasure, Your Grace."

"Ryder," he said quickly, unwilling to lose at least that intimacy.

"Ryder," she said softly, and her façade of cheer faded for a moment, but she tilted her chin up and squared her shoulders. "I'll never be able to thank you."

"There will never be any need." The words sliced through him. He'd said goodbye to so many women. It had never bothered him. But this? This felt like salt in a wound cut to the bone.

"I wish you every happiness," she said carefully and then, without waiting for his reply, spun on her heel and whisked out of the room.

Silence hung in her wake, mixed with her scent, the scent of cinnamon and roses. If he closed his eyes, he might imagine she was still there.

But she was gone.

And rightly.

They had both been adults. They had confronted their desire, come to an understanding and now they would go on with their lives. Forever changed by each other.

Forever apart.

Ryder rose up onto one arm, and for the first time, he realized he had not taken off Jane's ribbon. He had been too consumed in the moment to think of anything else but Kathryn.

God, he was an ass. And a fool.

Ryder sat up and rested his head in his hands. All along, he'd been trying to protect her from him. From his locked up heart and dangerous ways. He knew himself and the little he could give a woman. But never once had he thought he might need protection from her.

It was almost laughable.

Kathryn Darrell had knocked out the first stone in the wall he'd so carefully built around his heart, and he was unsure if he'd ever be able to replace it.



Swallowing great gulps of air, Kate rushed out of the Duke of Albany's house. Deliberately, she avoided eye contact with the guests. She would not cry, not in front of his peers. Not in front of these hardened lovers.

Gregory followed her out into the chilly night. As a good servant should, he said nothing.

It wasn't until Kate was in the safety of her carriage that she let the hot tears burning her eyes slip down her cheeks. Her hands curled into fists, grasping great swaths of her skirts. She'd said goodbye to him.

Just as she should.

Tension shook her body, and she leaned back, resting her head against the velvet squabs. She forced herself to take slow breaths. Crying wouldn't solve any of her problems. Tonight had been another lesson in her abrupt education to the ways of society. She could entertain herself amongst the sinful set. She could even enjoy herself, but she was going to be haunted by the way Ryder touched her heart. She was always going to be looking for him, longing for his touch.

But he didn't want her.

Not the way she was coming to want him. And she would never let him know. She'd played that horrid game before. She would not love a man who did not love her in turn. No, she would continue on, smiling and when she saw him she would nod and say hello. She would be an independent woman under no man's control. And she would find happiness.

"I will," she whispered to the darkness. "I will."

CHAPTER 14

*I*t wasn't amusing.

Ryder blew out a harsh breath, clasped the second bottle of brandy brought to his table and poured the amber liquid into a well-used crystal tumbler to his right. He straightened the bottle, glanced down at the half full glass, shrugged then added another hearty splash for good measure.

The steward at Brooks's hadn't even lifted a brow at his Olympian consumption of brandy. It was nigh on two in the morning. The club was decently full. Several groups of lords sat at tables playing cards, shouting out toasts to various ladies of their acquaintance and drinking pitchers of wine. Another group of young toads, fopped out in towering, powdered wig, and pink, green and yellow silk coats sat by the windows, hollering at the women of the night walking the dubious street below. The blasted festiveness was palpable.

It was infinitely possible he was going to kill them all. If the din of his own single-minded thoughts didn't kill him first.

Tossing a quarter of the brandy back, he spotted the veritable mountain of wadded writing paper resting at his black booted feet. A clean sheet sat on the table just before him on a green felt blotter. The crystal inkwell winking up at him dared him to write yet again. The India ink was depressingly low. He'd used nigh on half a pint.

At varying points of his long occupation in his chair, the servants had tried to collect the papers but he waved them off. The pile on the floor was a reminder as to why he was not going to start another note to Kathryn, despite the siren lure of the white sheet in front of him.

It was ridiculous.

A youth in the first flush of some idyllic infatuation could not be more idiotic. Or worse. A damn poet languishing over the right words to praise his lady love. Even so, the desire to write her, to have some communication with her, consumed him. He'd even sent his footman home to see if she'd written him.

Twice.

She hadn't.

Apparently, Kathryn Darrell had superior willpower. Unlike him.

Lifting the glass of brandy back to his lips, Ryder eyed the sheet of paper as if it was a direct enemy. An enemy leading him to a certain and unpleasant death.

“Pickling your liver?”

Ryder forced himself to tear his gaze from the note. “Ah, Hunt.” Sprawling back in his chair Ryder gave the duke a half-hearted grin. “If you intend to be an arse, skive off.”

“I could never be anything but perfectly amiable.” Hunt eyed the letters scattered about, shifted his gaze to Ryder, checking for signs of madness, then sat in the opposite leather chair, his emerald green coat almost black in the candlelight. “Practicing your correspondence?”

“These?” Ryder gestured at the offending sheets with his glass. “Nothing, old man, nothing.” He was not about to confess he’d written twenty notes of differing length to Kathryn in the last two hours. And he certainly wouldn’t admit he’d nearly sent five.

Each time, he’d just managed to stop his footman before committing that act of lunacy. Ryder shifted back on the rich, brown leather chair. He’d appear careless if it cost him his last nerve.

“Mmm.” Hunt leaned forward, the silver embroidery on his coat glowing in the faint light. He sat silently for a moment, nodding. Then, with the speed of a damn mongoose, he darted down and snatched one up.

Ryder lurched forward. The crystal glasses shook on the table, but he paid them no heed in his bid to snatch the paper from Hunt’s hand.

“*Dearest Kathryn,*” Hunt read. He threw back his head and laughed. The bastard laughed so hard he wiped his eyes. “You’ve been conquered.”

Ryder grabbed the sheet. Furious he’d been caught acting so ludicrously, he crumpled the paper into a tight little ball and dropped it back down to the others. “No,” he bit out. “I have not.”

Hunt cocked his head. “Then I’m to assume that those pages in a pretty little pile at your feet aren’t all addressed to,” Hunt batted his lashes and placed one hand over his heart, “*My dearest Kathryn?*”

Ryder ground his teeth together, unable to deny it.

Shaking his head, Hunt sat forward. “Come now, it seems the only two people who don’t realize the remedy to their situation is yourself and Mrs. Darrell.” He reached for the bottle of brandy, eyed its half empty state then poured himself a stiff glass. “Two more bullheaded—”

“Enough,” Ryder cut in. “I know your intentions are good but—”

“Look man, face facts.” Hunt’s usually laissez fair smile faded. “You’re walking around with all the cheer of a baited bear. You’ve had the woman. You still want her. It’s time you do something about it.”

Ryder was tempted to slam his fist into his friend’s face for linking Kathryn’s name with such scandalous actions, but they had been obvious in their too brief affair, and Hunt did have a point. “There’s nothing to be done.”

Hunt’s eyes widened as if Ryder was the slowest man in Christendom. “Of course there is.”

“What? Self-slaughter?” Ryder drawled, having no wish to play games.

“*Marriage*,” Hunt said slowly, speaking as he would to a small child.

Ryder sputtered on a sip of brandy and winced as the alcohol rushed into his nose.

Hunt scowled and flicked away the dark spots on his immaculate coat. “Do be careful, this is new.”

Desperate for a lifeline out of this damned line of questioning, Ryder grabbed onto one of his friend’s most sensitive political causes. The extravagance of the wealthy. Anything to avoid the *M*-word. “You can afford a hundred new coats.”

“Yes, but I like this one. Besides, one shouldn’t just toss money away. The poor in the east end rarely acquire new clothing, go shoeless with great frequency and if the Lords simply gave a few of their many pounds. . .” Hunt stopped himself and pinned Ryder with a knowing stare. “Very clever, but I’ll not be distracted. You can still save the woman’s reputation. Your title, her wealth—”

“Marriage is not an option,” Ryder said flatly, his fingers instinctively wandering to the pale ribbon about his wrist.

“Isn’t it?” Hunt set his glass down and folded his arms across his chest.

Glancing towards the windows, Ryder said in a low tone, “I won’t do it again.” He couldn’t. It would be the worst betrayal of the woman who had been so kind to him.

The silence drew out between them for several seconds before Hunt said quietly, “Jane would understand. You know that, do you not?”

Ryder shifted on his seat, familiar pain cutting at his innards. His parents died when he was young and he had no brothers and sisters. Jane had been the only soothing thing he had in his life. She’d taught him how to be merry and take joy from the simple things. Their marriage had been so peaceful and so short. What he regretted most was they had no child, and she’d. . .

He looked down at the white notes that symbolized his growing betrayal of his first wife. "You know what I did," he whispered.

The usual calm that formed Hunt's presence vanished, and he slammed his broad palm down on the table. "You did nothing."

"I let her die," he said lowly, his voice near breaking as the memories rushed back him.

"Look at me," Hunt snapped.

Bile churned in his stomach at the thought of Jane's death, of her ravaged body, but Ryder forced himself to look up.

Hunt's face had gone hard. His green eyes spiked with anger and a bizarre mix of sympathy. "She died of small pox, Darkwell. Last I heard, not even you can stop the destruction of disease."

A muscle ticked in Ryder's jaw, and he gave the slightest nod to acknowledge Hunt's words. But he couldn't stop the never ending self-reproach burning in his belly. He could still see his young wife's terrified face as she died tortured by the sickness. "I should have taken better care of her. I should have stopped her."

"She had a large heart, and she wanted to help your tenants," Hunt said gently.

It didn't matter. As a husband, it had been in Ryder's power to forbid her to go amongst his dying tenants. His throat tightened, and he had to suck in a breath. If he had just told her no, she never would have contracted the illness. She would still be alive, if he had just taken better care of her. God, she had been so stubborn. He told her again and again she shouldn't go. She refused to listen. Yes. He should have ordered her, locked her up if need be.

Anything to keep her safe.

Slowly, he caressed the ribbon that had been so often in her soft hair. If he closed his eyes and remembered, he could still smell her faint scent of lemon and lavender. It was enough to sting his eyes. "I don't wish to discuss it."

Sighing, Hunt nodded. "Understood, but I grow tired of your brooding. You can only flagellate yourself for so long."

Ryder narrowed his eyes. "I don't brood."

The duke arched an arrogant brow. "Have you considered that if you do *not* marry Mrs. Darrell, she's destroyed?"

He had. Of course he had, but he couldn't face that thought just now. And as far as he could see, Kathryn had no desire to marry *him*. She made that quite

clear before. "Did you come here to discuss my love life or was Mrs. Barton simply not at home?"

Hunt shoved back from the table and stood. "In truth, I came to get you out of here. I thought you might be growing mold."

Ryder snorted and glared up at his friend. "You're *amiability* is dimming."

Then again he had been sitting here for hours. And if he sat here any longer, he'd soon be writing another letter. God, it was appalling how much he wanted to contact her.

It was the most strenuous test of his self-control he'd ever known, this simple action of *not* writing her a letter. He, the Duke of Death, the Duke of Debauchery, was having trouble *not* writing a letter. If he had heard it of any other man, he would have laughed his head off.

Hunt nodded towards the hall. "You can bring the brandy bottle if you want, but you're coming with me."

Ryder eyed the nearly empty bottle. He was afloat in the stuff, and he felt only the faintest of effects. To his surprise, he heard himself ask, "Where did you have in mind?"

Hunt eyed him up and down, a touch of disbelief quirking his brows. "In the prickly state you're in?"

"State?" His hackles rose. He'd worked hard to control the rages that had stormed inside him since Jane. If he hadn't been able to control them, he locked himself away. He thought he'd been hiding his unease admirably. Perhaps not.

"You're in need of a cure," Hunt said merrily.

Sighing, Ryder pushed his chair back and slowly stood. The room spun just a little, but soon righted itself. "What kind of cure?"

"Mrs. Darrell has infected your blood." Hunt waggled his brows, an anticipatory gleam brightening his green eyes. "It's obvious you're pining away for her, and we must draw her from you as one draws an illness."

"Pining?" Ryder drawled. "The Duke of Darkwell does not pine."

"Yes, he does." Hunt pointed at him. "Like a little school girl for her fluffy white kitten."

Knowing full well if he started a brawl in the main hall of Brooks' he'd be out of a club and on his arse in the street, duke or no duke, Ryder managed not to reach forward and knock his friend's head off his shoulders. Ryder leveled his friend with a ball crushing stare. "Do you wish to have your eyeballs upon the table?"

“Good.” Hunt pulled at his pristine white cuffs then brushed down the front of his silver waistcoat. “I’m ready to see you do something besides drown yourself in a brandy sea.”

They started heading towards the hall. “So, what’s the cure?” Ryder asked.

Hunt laughed. “A new man in town out of the West Indies is throwing a gentleman’s only party.”

“Not a planter. I hate sugar planters. They’re boring as all hell. What kind of amusement do you think we can get from one of those slave owning bastards—”

“I think he was in another line,” Hunt cut in.

“Indeed?” Ryder asked, curious now despite himself. “What line?”

“Let’s say, he might just hoist the jolly roger and ask you to walk the plank.”

Hmm. After the damned angst he’d swum in since meeting Mrs. Darrell, a jump into shark infested waters didn’t concern him. Actually, in comparison, it sounded downright comforting.

CHAPTER 15

*P*aper. There had to be paper somewhere.

Ryder glanced about the male packed hallway, hoping he might spot some sort of desk hiding in the fray of grumbling lords.

But the only thing in the hall, besides the massive paintings in golden frames hanging upon the red and gold silk walls, were men.

Possibly hundreds of them.

The paintings were damn interesting though. Naked women and a few men were depicted in all sorts of positions. The beautiful women seemed to glance down at the onlookers, urging them to try whatever sexual delectation they were participating in. Ryder had tried most of the positions at some point, and he'd certainly seen books depicting the sexual teachings of the east, but never had he seen such large or lifelike recreations.

The center painting was a lecherous pan, tall as a giant, his furry legs and hooves painted feather brown beneath a Grecian torso. A golden flute was at his lips, and he beckoned with mischievous green eyes. Interesting that the most devious and lecherous of the paintings was the largest.

Ryder glanced down the hall, grinding his teeth together. His patience was slowly dimming. He'd come here to forget about Kathryn, and what was he doing? Standing in a large hallway with nude portraits, a group of the *ton's* most preposterous men, and all he wanted or could think about was Kathryn.

Perhaps if he summoned a footman, surely he could get a quill and paper? Or perhaps he should just hie off and throw pebbles at her window like some obsessed Romeo? But given his current state, he'd probably chuck a stone and break the glass. Hardly, the way to win a lady.

"Cease and desist, I tell you."

He snapped his gaze to Hunt who had been shifting from booted foot to booted foot. "Hmm?"

"I know what you're thinking."

"And?" Ryder challenged. He couldn't possibly be that transparent.

Hunt blew out a breath, shaking his head. "You are a pathetic display of manhood."

Ryder snorted. "My manhood is splendid, thank you very much."

"Oh?" Hunt's brows rose innocently. "I thought perhaps you'd lost it all together, what with the way you're staring about like a moon calf. I know you're thinking about her."

Moon? Ryder ground his teeth, trying not to breathe fire. Apparently he was that obvious. And it was damn disconcerting. He was *moon*ing over a woman. A woman who didn't want to see him again for that matter.

Hunt folded his arms across his broad chest and said as a judge condemning a man to the gallows, "Mrs. Darrell owns your manhood now, my friend."

"Ridiculous," Ryder scoffed, but he couldn't quite stop himself from glancing askance. "I haven't thought of her since we left the club." Surely he sounded sincere?

About as sincere as a dockside pimp swearing his girls were sweet as strawberry tart.

Hunt stared back, unblinking. "And I like to dress up in pink satin and trot about in high heeled slippers."

Ryder pinned Hunt with a mocking stare. "Well, I did hear about the Gaddington party. . ."

Several sets of curious gazes swung towards them. The combinations of words was too good to ignore.

Hunt narrowed his eyes, jerked his finger up and jabbed it into Ryder's chest. "Speak of it and die."

Clearing his throat, Hunt glared at the onlookers. "Skive off."

And at his growling tone, the nosy bastards all looked up at the paintings murmuring loudly.

Ryder fought a laugh, turning his attention back to Hunt. "A might sensitive, are we? Come now, you make a lovely woman. A tad muscular perhaps but—"

"Look here, I'd had ten bottles of champagne," Hunt huffed, his voice hushed in some feigned stage whisper. "A man that soused, will do anything—"

"Including singing *My Wild Irish Rose* while waving a peacock feather fan at Lord Wellesley?" Ryder taunted, loving that he was no longer the focus of criticism and that Hunt was the one defending himself.

"I have a very fine voice, I'll have you know."

A group of flask drinking, snuffing military men in scarlet coats and enough gold on their uniforms to stun a maharajah pressed into them.

Ryder and Hunt simultaneous threw the young pups a ball-crushing stare.

The youngest, a white powdered wig atop his cherry red face, guffawed. “Beg your pardons. It is a bit close in here, is it not?”

At Ryder’s unfriendly stare, the young man swallowed and turned back to his friends who did their best to press into the crowd opposite them.

In truth, the room was growing suffocating what with the lords packed in like sardines, and the smell. . .

Thick perfume, cigar smoke, tragically the ripe odor of male and god knew what else was wafting through the ever-heating hall.

“Who the hell is this duke?” Hunt demanded, eyeing the horde. “And why the devil is he keeping *us* waiting.”

Ryder shook his head at Hunt’s irritation. The party so far was only intriguing for its lack of host and number of men all located in one place outside a club or a battlefield. Most of them were attired in insane finery. Gold, silver and jewels were encrusted on the men’s coats. Each obviously eager to show their importance.

They all stood milling before a set of gold double doors. If he didn’t know better he’d think he was being admitted to a gaudy Almacks.

“I need a drink.” Hunt glanced about for any signs of a servant, his mouth twisting with displeasure. “If I wanted to mill about with men, I could have gone to Parliament.”

Ryder gave him a hard stare. “This was your idea.”

“Well, I was expecting a divers—”

The shimmering echo of a gong rippled through the air, and the golden doors slowly began to open. A general murmur of confusion and anticipation went up from the crowded gentlemen.

“My lords!” A servant boomed out from somewhere in the crowd. “Please proceed to an island of pleasure.”

“An island of pleasure?” Ryder echoed. He cocked his head and bared his teeth in a mocking grin. “I’m going to kill you, you know that, don’t you?”

Hunt rolled his eyes and started forward, following the crowd pushing forward. As they all pressed in towards the gold doors, the strangest music began to beat. Drums. It sounded like bloody tribal drums, chiming symbols and other unidentifiable music. To Ryder’s surprise, it was damn stirring. And not in the way one might feel marching off to battle.

In fact, if one played the music in the streets, he doubted one would have to fear a decline in population. An enterprising government might play such music to increase the number of tax payers.

And then the gasps and laughter started.

“What the deuce do they see?” Hunt demanded. Standing at least a foot taller than the men about them, he peered over their heads.

“Hell,” Ryder announced, his good humor fizzing away as the feeling increased he was about to be launched into Dante’s inferno.

As the crowd filtered through and they entered into the vast room, Ryder found his mouth slowly dropping. Swaths of red, gold, and purple had been draped from the ceiling to form some massive tent. Candles and torches lined the walls, even massive mirrors swung from the curtains.

Feast like, tables piled high with food and drink were placed all over the room. There was even a small stage with lanterns along the front edge.

That was not what caused the general excitement.

“If this is Hell, I’m Lucifer’s newest devotee,” Hunt said, his voice low with delight.

Ryder on the other hand blew out a harsh breath. “Blast and damnation. Not women.”

Everywhere there were cushions. Red and purple velvet cushions with golden tassels, but in the end what man really cared about such things when one considered the women lounging on them. Wearing nothing but silken fabrics wrapped about their waists in the strangest skirts and tight about their legs. Their breasts were covered by the merest twists of the sheerest fabric, taunting and teasing.

Color was everywhere. The women’s hair was of a multitudinous rainbow. Jet blacks, brazen red, to palest blonde, they displayed themselves like languid cats ready to be stroked and petted.

“Oh yes,” Hunt purred. “A buffet of women.”

And it was.

“Do you think they can stand under the weight of all that gold?” Ryder asked unsure if he was amused or annoyed by the display of decadence.

“Who wants them to stand?” Hunt’s displeased look vanished, now replaced by a wide-eyed one of anticipatory bliss.

The music grew wilder, and a group of women, dressed just like the others, appeared from the back of the room, dancing forward. Their bodies undulated, their hips rippling, mimicking the way they’d rock with a man driving his cock into her.

“Your host, my lords! The Duke of Aston!” a voice shouted.

Suddenly, from some hidden hallway behind the dancing women, another group of women strode into the room, bearing a glittering litter on their shoulders.

“Good god, it’s not.”

“It is,” Ryder said dryly.

“I definitely think we should ask him to be a member of our club.”

Ryder snorted. “That peacocked ponce?”

The women kept walking slowly forward, their half naked bodies dusted with gold. With seeming ease, they kept the litter balanced on their shoulders. On it, a man lounged back on his elbow. He wore black boots, black pants, and a red brocade coat over a white shirt open at the neck. His long black hair was studded with gold and a giant black hat with red feathers sat atop his head. The music came to a halt, and the women slowly lowered the litter.

Well, Ryder’d give the Duke of Aston his due. He knew how to make a splash into the murky *ton* waters.

Aston stepped off his golden transportation and grabbed two girls to him, nuzzling the blonde one to his right then the red one to his left. He lifted his head and laughed, pressing his hands to their bare waists. “Welcome to my harem, gentleman! Tonight, what is mine, is yours!”

And on cue, the women on the pillows slowly rose to their hands and knees and crawled forward into the crowd of men.

“Yes,” Hunt groaned.

“No,” Ryder moaned in protest.

How the hell had this happened to him? He’d been at peace in Brooks’s. Well, he’d been going mad with thoughts of Kathryn, but he hadn’t been about to be ravished by a pack of sex-crazed females. Not that they weren’t exquisite, but despite the fact he couldn’t have Kathryn, he wanted only her.

He turned to Hunt who was already eyeing a particularly voluptuous redhead. “I’ll be back,” he muttered, not overly concerned about leaving the duke to the ladies.

“Where the hell are you going?” Hunt asked absentmindedly as he reached out to the woman who locked eyes with him, her lower lip moist as if she just licked it.

“I need air.”

Hunt beamed down at the beautiful woman, opening his arms wide. “More for me.”

Ryder shook his head and strode through the pack of entwining men and women. Already groups were moving towards the artfully arranged cushions. Albany's Devil's Dance was about to be torn down from its place as the height of sensual sin.

Ryder ignored them, heading back towards the doors. He needed paper and quill. Surely, if he worded a note properly, if he could keep his priorities in order, somehow they could keep a relationship. Indeed, he longed to hear Kathryn's voice, see her stormy eyes and feel her slender body against his.

"Running off, Your Grace?" The dark voice was rough as gravel and full of mischief.

Ryder stopped and turned. Aston. "No, I need a bit of air. I find it a trifle stifling in here."

The man's bizarre amber eyes glinted with humor. He held a gold and ruby goblet in his beringed right hand, the ruffles of his shirt teasing the lip of the cup. "But you mustn't miss tonight's entertainment. I assure you. . ." He paused as if searching for the right words. "You *will* be amused."

Ryder hesitated for a moment, a good dose of suspicion running through him. "Thank you, but I have seen enough."

"Ah, but tonight, I have a very special performance arranged. I had no idea you'd be here to see it." Aston's deep voice lilted with amusement, clearly enjoying some particularly delicious morsel. "It is a theatrical."

Ryder inclined his head. "If you insist." He could just walk out, but he'd never hear the end of it from Hunt, and Aston was up to something.

"Oh, I do. First." Aston lifted his arms in a bombastic and welcoming gesture. The folds of his floor length red coat billowed about his large frame. "Come. You require a libation."

What he *required* was paper. But he was more like to find whips and feather ticklers first.

Begrudgingly, Ryder followed Aston to a table near the small stage. The servant dressed in a turban and white pants, his chest bare, handed Aston a goblet. The duke turned to Ryder and thrust it at him. "You'll need it."

Ryder eyed the yellowish liquid wondering if Aston's plan was to poison the ton. But he took the cup and drank. The rich taste of rum and juice sweetened his tongue. Not bad. Not bad at all. He tossed it back in a few quick swallows. "Again."

Aston smiled, nodding. "I knew you'd like it." The duke snapped his ruby-ringed fingers, and the servant instantly produced another drink.

“I’ve heard about your escapade with Mrs. Darrell.” Aston’s voice purred innocently as he handed him the refreshed cup. “I should love to hear about it firsthand.”

Ryder took the cup, the little good humor he’d begun to feel dissipating.

Aston smiled slowly exposing a predatory grin. “I hear she’s quite the beauty and throwing herself headlong—or shall we say skirt long?—at sin.” He twirled his hand contemplatively, the folds of his red coat, swirling. “Whichever term you prefer, of course.”

Ryder locked eyes with the London’s newest cocky prick, ready to cut him down to a more modest size. “I beg your pardon?” he gritted, his voice a subtle warning the good duke just touched on a forbidden topic.

Not heeding that warning, Aston didn’t flinch from Ryder’s gaze. In fact, he stared back like one dock yard dog challenging another. Casually, he lifted his goblet to his lips with the ease of a damn pasha and took a careless drink, the juice lacing slightly down his chin.

Dashing it from his lips, Aston whispered, his voice conspiratorial, “I heard she was quite the piece of tart. That you sampled her slice at the Royal Opera.” He raised his eyebrows ever so slightly. “Was it sweet? For I love nothing better than a sweet slice of tart.”

Ryder slammed his cup down on the table, then his hands curled into twin fists. He was going to rip out the man’s tongue and turn him into a woman so he might sing a different and less offensive tune. “Your Grace, I request you retract your statement about the lady.”

Aston tilted his head as if he was puzzling something out, causing the feathers on his hat to dance merrily. “Pardon old man, but was there a lady in question?”

Ryder exhaled slowly, though he doubted that would help him cling to calm. With every moment, his blood pumped harder, faster, demanding he throttle the duke. The man was a total stranger, and yet he was undoubtedly delighting in this. “Aston, you’re insulting, and I’m one step from knocking you into next week.”

Aston let out a barrel laugh so large, he pressed his hand to his chest and heaved for breath.

Ryder stared at him, hoping the bastard was just mad from too many hours in the sun on the high seas. But nothing would stop him from ripping his head off if he disrespected Kathryn one more time.

“Tell, me Your Grace, do you enjoy play acting?” Aston’s voice dripped with innocence.

A sick feeling grabbed Ryder’s gut. “On occasion.”

“Then you’ll adore this.” And without ado, Aston lifted his right hand.

The music came to a sudden stop, and a young man wearing a silver mask and just a pair of dark breeches jumped onto the stage. His muscled chest reflected the yellow glow of the lamp lit stage. “My lords! Tonight we tell the fabulous tale of a pretty country widow come to London!”

The crowd of men and women attending them turned towards the entertainment. Their wide, lust filled eyes lit with excitement at the forthcoming entertainment.

A few whistles and cheers went up causing the young entertainer to lift his hands to silence them.

Country widow? Ryder glanced at Aston. “What the hell?”

“Enterprising on the moment, my dear fellow. Just like every other man will do with Mrs. Darrell. You do realize she is the fantasy of every man in the *ton*? If she leads the gents to her lovely tune, she’ll be the jewel of the *demimondaine*.”

“Stop.” The world was spinning hard and fast, and he wasn’t sure what he was going to do.

“Stop what?”

“Whatever you’re about to do,” Ryder said flatly.

“The moment you took her in the opera, you two became open to such entertaining commentary. I am only giving you what you and every other man wants.” Aston arched a single brow. “Or did you wish for something else?”

The young performer gestured to the right. “I give you the delicious Mrs. D.”

A woman strode onto the stage, her face hidden by a bejeweled mask. But there was no question she was supposed to be Kate. Her blonde hair was curled, tumbling down her back and she wore a surprisingly modest pink gown.

“And her corrupter,” the narrator announced.

To the gasps and laughter of the audience, a man all in black, down to the mask that covered his eyes, took the stage. He circled the girl who bent, pressing her breasts even tighter together as she shivered dramatically at his presence.

“This is disgusting,” Ryder growled, staring at the representation of himself.

“Shh.” Aston waved at him dismissively. “You’re spoiling a splendid performance.”

The man sat on the small couch on stage. "Come, my sweet, have a seat." And he leaned back parting his legs and pointing to his cock. "Right here."

The girl playing Kate hesitated, exclaiming, "Oh, but I should not! For I am a virtuous widow."

The actor turned to the audience and stage whispered out to them, "Ah, but this widow had her bud plucked. So, I will finger her rose."

The crowd laughed.

"Come, my dear, sit upon me," the actor commanded, his voice booming dramatically.

The young woman sighed, waving her hand in front of her smile then finally walked over and modestly sat upon his lap.

"And now, there is too much between us. I cannot bear to be parted from you." The man took the girl in his arms, pulled her skirts up then yanked her astride his lap. "Or your sweet petals."

"Oh, my lord!" the girl trilled. "Whatever are you doing?"

"Tending to your bush."

"Oh! Oh!" She squirmed eagerly against him, tugging her skirts up higher and higher, gradually showing off her taut, pale bum to the audience.

And then they began to thrust against each other letting out ridiculously enthusiastic cries of pleasure.

Ryder let out a breath so harsh, his lungs burned then he turned to Aston. "I swear to God, you're going to burn in Hell tonight."

"Come now, just a bit of fun." Aston's amber eyes glowed with merriment. "The actress is quite good. Don't you think?"

The entire room was laughing and shouting encouragement to the couple on stage. The entire town knew how he and Kathryn had been discovered and now they were delighting in it as if it was the only form of entertainment.

"Fun?" Ryder snapped. Fury washed over him.

Suddenly, he felt Hunt's hand on his shoulder, but he refused to tear his gaze from Aston.

"Let's go," Hunt urged quietly.

Ryder brushed his hand away. "I'm not leaving till this scum is a wet spot upon the floor."

"Scum?" Aston threw back his head and laughed yet again. "Oh, my fellow, it was not I who left the delicious Mrs. D high and dry with no virtue to her name." Aston leaned forward and winked. "Why, that was you. Wasn't it, lad?"

White flashed before Ryder eyes. His muscles flexed. His hand flew back, and his fist throttled forward. The punch slammed Aston in the mouth, splitting his knuckles.

Instead of sprawling as Ryder expected, Aston smiled, his teeth bloody. “At last.”

CHAPTER 16

“*You* son of a bitch.” Hunt launched forward to grab Aston.

Ryder seized Hunt and hauled him back.

“He’s mine,” Ryder hissed, his voice so low, he could barely hear it.

But instead of turning on Aston, Ryder vaulted toward the stage. Without even thinking, he jumped onto the polished wood paneling and grabbed the girl playing *his* Kathryn from the man’s lap. Pink skirts flew about as he yanked her free. Her muddy brown eyes flared beneath her mask. Regardless of her screams, he tossed her onto his shoulder.

The man in black scrambled from the couch and ran for the edge of the stage.

Ryder carried the girl off the platform. Every step sent his blood firing faster through his veins. Shrieking and flailing her arms, Ryder plopped her down unceremoniously onto a damned tasseled cushion.

Firmly, he grasped her shoulders. “Your acting is sadly deficient. I suggest a new trade.”

She nodded wildly.

A hand grabbed his shoulder, and without looking Ryder whipped around and punched.

Aston blocked the blow with his forearm, and the ass was smiling—*smiling!*

“Pistols!” Ryder challenged. “At dawn.”

Still smiling, Aston shook his head. “Sorry lad, we fight now or never.”

The man was bloody daft. And Ryder was going to put him out of his misery. “With pleasure.” He darted in, driving his fist into Aston’s gut.

Shaking his head, Aston staggered back. “Good punch. Harder next time.” He whipped his coat off and threw it out to the crowd who let up a merry cheer.

Ryder’s gaze followed the flickering red for a moment, and he realized he and Aston were still on stage with the entire group of guests watching as if they were a Punch and Judy Show.

At that exact moment, Aston jabbed him in the nose. The world exploded in sparks and Ryder twisted back to the duke. Hollers and shouts went up from the harem girls and the lords on the cushions below.

“Good show! Best I’ve seen!” some idiot shouted which was followed by a host of giggles.

Ryder tried to ignore it but it was the most grating sound. Aston darted right, pulled his fist back, the tendons on his arm cording. He slammed a punch into Ryder’s abdomen.

Furious he’d let him get in two hits, Ryder blew out a harsh breath. He balanced on the balls of his toes, focused on Aston’s ugly face then jabbed.

The duke’s head jerked back but he came back up, that damn smile still on his face, only this time blood streamed down his chin. “That’s it, Darkwell!” he yelled. “Give me all you’ve got.”

Ryder shook his head at the man’s lunacy, but kept up the attack. Circling right, countering the duke’s movements, he looked for his next in. He was not going to let him go—mad or not. After all, the man besmirched Kathryn and no man was going to walk straight come the next morning after slandering her.

Hunt somehow got up to the edge of the stage. Standing beside it, his black hair glistening like obsidian in the candlelight, he pounded his hands against the platform. “Take him down, Darkwell! Take the pirate bugger down!”

He and Aston kept beating on each other, exchanging punch after punch until they were slinging badly aimed hooks and jabs. With growing frustration, Ryder realized they were evenly matched, and after several minutes both of them were staggering around the stage, swinging at the air and bleeding like bizarre fountains.

Not to mention they were both breathing like overworked bulls.

Everyone in the crowd jumped to their feet, leaning forward to see who would be last. Over the blur and ringing in his ears, Ryder could have sworn he heard someone making bets.

“Drive the poxy bastard into the carpet!” Hunt shouted again.

“W-What carpet!?” Ryder stammered, his legs heavy and his mouth dry as cotton.

Luckily, Aston swayed on his feet. Blood spattered his white shirt, and the grin had gone from his face. In fact, he was blinking furiously, his right eye swelling up like a plum.

Ryder drew up his fists and tried not to let his legs buckle. He couldn’t remember the last time someone had made such meat of him, but he was going to take the bastard down.

For Kathryn.

Narrowing his eyes against the swaying room, Ryder darted forward and cracked his fist into Aston's cheek. . . Just as Aston brought his fist up in an upper cut to Ryder's chin.

His face throbbed like an exploded grape, and Ryder felt the world spin as he tumbled. Bizarrely, Aston cushioned his fall.

"Not a tie!" Hunt groaned.

The crazed duke started laughing beneath him, occasionally sucking in whistling breaths. He slapped his hand against Ryder's back. "I take it back. I take it back," Aston gasped. "Mrs. Darrell. . . is a virtuous woman. . . and my entertainment was uncalled for."

"Damn right," Ryder slurred, unsure if all his teeth were still in his head.

Face down, Aston rested his hands on the scuffed wood floor. "Now, get off me. You're as heavy as an ox."

"Certainly." Ryder blinked, fought a groan as pain stabbed his ribs, and shifted onto the floor, which seemed like an infinitely safe place right now. After all, one couldn't fall when one was sitting on the floor.

Ryder looked about. The music started up again and the crowd returned to their various states of dissipation. Damnation, but the place looked like a painting straight out of Lucifer's dreams. The lords and harem girls, drunk on the fun from the fight and copious bottles of wine and brandy, were all over each other, limbs writhing in one massive bed of cushions.

Aston rolled into a sitting position, eyeing his bloody shirt. "Good fight, Darkwell."

Hunt jumped up on the stage and glowered down at the mad duke. "What the hell is wrong with you, man?"

Aston wiped the blood from his mouth with the back of his hand. It was then Ryder realized his hand was covered in tattoos.

Leaning back on his palms, Aston blew out a satisfied sigh. "Nothing, just one can't get a decent fight this side of Jamaica. Sorry I prodded you so vigorously, Darkwell. I heard you were a comer, and so I couldn't help myself."

Ryder narrowed his eyes. "You arranged the fight, you sick prick?"

Aston wiggled his brows and smiled. "Right on, me hearty."

The duke struggled to his feet and staggered a bit. He gazed about at the glorious array of sin he too had arranged and let another one of his barrel laughs then winced and clutched his ribs. Panting he stood straight. "Beautiful sight this."

"You're crazed," Hunt stated, keeping his distance from the mad duke.

“No doubt. But I’m happy.” Aston tucked in his shirt tails. And indeed, a blissful smile was pinned on his bloody lips. “Now, if you’ll excuse me, I’ve a wench waiting for me.” He gave them a salute and started off. A few feet away he stopped. “Oh, and Darkwell, best of luck with your lass.”

Ryder’s fingers dug into the wood below, threatening to leave splinters under his nails. He scowled. “She’s not *my* lass.”

Aston nodded, a slow and exaggerated motion. “Of course she isn’t. But I do hope you’ll invite me to the wedding. Next best thing to a good fight is a wedding.” And with that he headed out of the room, his gate as shaky as a man tossed about on the high seas.

Ryder and Hunt watched the man go. And when he was gone, Ryder shook his head. “What the hell was that?”

Hunt extended his hand and stared after the door Aston slipped through. “A sodding crack pot. We should definitely invite him to be part of the club.”

Groaning, Ryder took the offered arm and let Hunt pull him to his feet. “He is *not* going to be a member of the club, and he damn well isn’t coming to my wedding.”

Hunt stared blankly at him for a few seconds then said, “But you acknowledge you’re having one?”

Ryder opened his mouth to emphatically protest the ridiculousness of Aston’s words. But he couldn’t stop thinking how if he and Kathryn were married, he’d never have to see something like tonight’s debacle again. So, instead of answering the unpalatable question, he started for the doors, his step as drunk as Aston’s had been.

He gave the only reply he could think of. “Go to Hell, Hunt. Go to Hell.”

CHAPTER 17

*K*ate fingered the infamous list.

It was no longer valuable as anything but a symbol of her own idiocy, and she wished to bloody high heaven that Imogen hadn't had a jolly old time with Reginald in the closet. At least then, she wouldn't have a list detailing exactly where the duke could be at any given moment.

For instance, at this very moment, he was likely at his lawyer's for his weekly meeting regarding his estates.

In an hour's time, he would go for a ride in Hyde Park. And pathetic though it was, she carried the dratted note about with her as if that somehow made the duke closer.

It was horribly pathetic.

She'd even almost wrote him a letter. . . Five letters, if she was honest, but she'd burned the evidence before Imogen could harangue her for hours on end. In fact, her friend had been annoying beyond all possible reason, walking about with a knowing expression upon her mischievous features.

Kate marched into the breakfast room, tucked the list back into her bodice and picked up a plate. She faced the laden sideboard and took eggs, sausages, a kipper, muffins and bacon. As an afterthought she went back for another sausage. Despite what Imogen said, she wasn't upset.

Not in the least.

She was a mature woman perfectly capable of handling herself in such a situation.

She sat and poured herself a cup of tea then ladled in four heaping spoonfuls of sugar and a healthy dose of cream. Really, she was perfectly fine. She forked a sausage, skewering it with undue relish. She didn't need a man. She glanced at the sausage and glowered at it.

Indeed, she didn't.

A man was the last thing she needed. Darkwell had no effect on her. She had already forgotten him. Forgotten the way his dark eyes heated like coals as he looked at her. She'd forgotten his hands upon her body, and she'd certainly forgotten the way he felt as he thrust his cock inside her body.

No, he held no sway over her.

Kate looked down at her plate erupting with food and sighed. She was such a horrid liar. Suddenly, the food before her looked appalling. If she admitted it to herself, she knew exactly what she was doing. She only ever ate like a starving horse when she was upset. One could hardly call five sausages, a serving of eggs the size of a croquet ball and enough bacon to feed a small military force the actions of a perfectly rational person.

She took a sip of tea and grimaced. Sugar raced straight through her body and caused her teeth to grind together. She clunked the teacup back into its saucer and sighed. What was she doing?

She'd reverted back to being a coward, that's what. When she arrived in London, she'd been determined to be bold, and now she was tucked away in her London townhouse, her mind going over every moment she'd spent with Ryder.

Again. . . and again.

She pushed back from the table and flung her napkin down on the offending plate of food. Lord, she wanted to see him again so badly it hurt. Nibbling on her lower lip, she pulled the list back out and fingered it. He had no idea she had it. So, if she happened to come across him in Hyde Park there'd be no way he'd know that it was anything but a coincidence.

Kate stood hesitating. If she did see him, what would she do?

She'd be calm, collected, and the experienced lady of society she'd always wanted to be.

It only took her a few minutes to put on a suitable gown for a drive through the park and though it was the last thing she wanted to do, she went in search of Imogen who just smiled and picked up a shawl.

It wasn't fair that a lady couldn't go out by herself. But Kate was still holding to the merest thread of propriety.

They hurried out into glorious summer air, and Gregory held the carriage door open. Much to Kate's relief, the top was already down, so she wouldn't be completely obvious as she gadded about, looking for Ryder.

They headed across the lane and into the park. Imogen sat in silence for several seconds before she finally said, "Very fine weather, isn't it?"

The sun was out and the trees throughout the park were extremely green under the bright blue sky. However, Kate knew Imogen too well to be seduced by such banal speech. "You shan't succeed."

Imogen batted her lashes. "Whatever do you mean?"

“You couldn’t give two figs for the weather. If you’ve something to say, out with it.”

Imogen lifted her hand to her pale bosom edged with robin’s egg lace. “My, my, aren’t we in a lovely mood? I suppose you need a dose of your duke to make you sparkle again.”

“He is hardly *my duke*.” Just the opposite in fact. Which, of course, was how she wanted it. She never wanted to feel the way she had when Percy made it clear he had not loved her. His duplicity had only confirmed in her father’s eyes she was a fool.

She *had* been a fool to give her love to Percy. To give it to any man. In fact, she would never say she loved a man again. Of that, she was certain.

But seemingly that didn’t stop her to risk being a fool again to catch a glimpse of Ryder.

As they trotted down the lane running along the Serpentine, a few carriages rolled by. Whether green or black or blue, they sparkled with a fresh wash. Several had their tops down in the fine weather, exposing their owners. Ladies sat in striped red and cream silk, butter-yellow and lace, embroidered eggshell morning attire, all with hats decked with ribbons and plumes. And with each one that went by, Kate’s heart sank a little.

Lady after lady, from young to old, stared at her as if she were a moving rubbish heap. A particularly smelly rubbish heap. With fish in it. The gentlemen on their fine hunters openly leered at her or looked at her as if she was a set of goods to be bought in a secondhand store.

She was uncertain as to which was more disconcerting. Kate swallowed. She’d known she’d be stared at but she hadn’t realized quite how intently. Nor had she realized how intensely the lords and ladies of the *ton* would make their displeasure at her presence known.

It was the park, for goodness sake. It wasn’t as if she’d insisted on attending a tea party.

Apparently, more fool her for her optimism.

As they sped along, it became infinitely clear. She was good and truly ruined. Something she had known, but had not truly accepted the full effect of until this moment.

Good God, she was going to have to go to Spain, or develop a liking for strudel.

Imogen glanced at a passing carriage of old dragons, their quizzing glasses fixed on Kate, and their mouths pursed in identical frowns of horror. “My, there is quite a chill in the air.”

“Yes.” Kate folded her arms about her middle as though that might stave off the dagger stares.

“Perseverance, dearest Kathryn,” Imogen said cheerfully, though her eyes held a significant amount of doubt. “You must brave it.”

Kate tried to laugh, but couldn’t quite manage it.

“*Harlot!*” someone shouted and Kate turned about trying to see who it was. Whoever it was had already turned, but a young boy on his pony, his face freckled and pudgy from too many sweets, sniggered.

Imogen’s usually merry expression dimmed. “Ignore it, Kate.”

“Perhaps we should turn back,” she whispered.

Heavens, was this how it was going to be? Could she not even go for a drive? And with a sickening feeling she realized that yes, yes it was going to be this bad. Everyone tried to tell her, but she’d refused to accept the truth.

She was only fit for the likes of the demimondaine now.

A coach pulled up beside them, keeping pace. Its beautifully lacquered black siding reflected the trees, and it too had the top down. The large Carmine crest rested like a miniature shield on the door, the black cross over a white background ominous.

The Countess of Carmine sat, imperiously, a queen of the row. Her black hair was curled upon her head and a magnificent purple hat, bedecked with pale pink flowers and a veil perched atop her perfectly arranged coif. Her purple gown stood out as if she was royalty and her lips, rouged to a rose red, were set in a cruel smile of anticipation.

“Stop your coach,” she called, her voice hard with authority.

Imogen nodded to the coachman. It wasn’t as if they could give chase in Hyde Park. The gossip would be far worse.

Besides, she refused to run away and would not be run off by this woman.

Their carriages slowed. Resting one gloved hand on her carriage door, the countess leaned forward. Other riders, spotting her and the countess, began to gather round, the scent of gossip in the air.

The countess tilted her head and eyed Kate as if she were rotting meat. “Mrs. Darrell, I should give the cut direct but find I must address. . .” Her gaze traveled up and down her coldly. “Your person.”

Imogen started to speak, but Kate put her hand out. She didn’t wish her friend to be implicated in this any more than she had to be. “Pardon me, my lady, but do I have business with you?”

That caught the countess so off guard she stared for a moment, disbelieving that Kate wasn't cowering under her disapproval. Gathering her momentary shock, she narrowed her eyes. "I do have business with you. I have a duty to instruct you on proper behavior since you seem completely ignorant of it."

A low hush of whispers circled round the growing group of gossips. Coaches pressed in behind and in front of them. Ladies and gentlemen on horseback made no attempt to ride around, but rather rode as close as they could, all of them eager to see a bit of blood spilled.

"You see, Mrs. Darrell, a more honorable woman would realize the offense she gives to polite society by her stained presence."

Many of the onlookers nodded at the countess' words which sent a chill down Kate's spine. Londoners were notorious for their mob mentality, and though the day was fine, that might not stop them from making an example out of her.

"The air is free, Countess," Kate said firmly. "That is all I wish to take."

The countess's red lips pressed into a line. "Make no mistake, madam, you are not welcome here. You are a scandal and should be driven from all good society."

Kate swallowed, her gaze darting to the ever growing crowd which now included carriages, ladies and gentleman on horseback. Even those from the walking paths had taken note and were swarming in like bees to honey.

No one was coming to her defense, their eyes intense and excited. So, she would defend herself. "My lady, my society is as good as yours."

A series of gasps went up from the crowd as if Kate had just thrown the Bible down and danced upon it. Apparently, they all felt she should have the door of society slammed firmly in her face. And be tossed out into the mud to be trampled.

The countess laughed, a frozen sound. "You, madam, are not fit to wipe my boots. With your conduct you have established yourself a wh—"

"Think twice," a deep voice growled, "before you insult Her Grace, the future Duchess of Darkwell."

A rush of harried commotion went through the gossipmongers.

Kate whipped around looking for Ryder. She'd know his voice anywhere.

And there he was.

The Duke of Darkwell sat like a furious dark knight upon his black hunter. The crowd parted to allow him to ride through to her carriage. His gloved fists held the reins with a chokehold, and his face was a mask of rage.

Even with fury upon his face, he was the most welcome sight she had ever seen, and her heart leapt at his presence.

The countess sputtered. “Your Grace, surely you shan’t defend—”

As if to make himself absolutely clear he spoke loudly, “Defend my wife? I promise you, I shall bring down all powers of my ducal position to prosecute any who might slander her.”

“But. . . but. . .” the countess stuttered.

“*My lady.*” Ryder sneered as he pressed his hunter up between the carriages. “You are hardly one to pass judgment, and unless you wish me to air your sins, ride on.” He turned to the onlookers. “That goes for every one of you.”

For several seconds, the lords and ladies who had expected the public and final destruction of one of the wealthiest women in England gaped. But Ryder’s determined glare finally sent them slowly off.

The countess was forced to wait, being locked in by the other carriages. Her face was a pale mask of indignation, and she stared straight ahead. Which suited Kate just fine. If she never had to look at the woman again, she would count herself very happy.

When the din died down Ryder’s eyes softened, though banked anger still heated them. His gaze darted over her, and a muscle worked in his throat. “Are you well? Did they harm you?”

Her own gaze traveled over his face, and she sucked in a sharp breath. Several bruises darkened his already tawny skin. “What happened to you?”

A muscle tightened in his jaw, and he smiled tightly. “Nothing. An exchange of words.”

“I didn’t realize words could leave such marks,” Kate said gently, wanting nothing more than to soothe away any hurt he might have sustained.

“I am perfectly well,” he said, “I only wish to know you are unharmed.”

His obvious concern sent her heart rioting and she had to take several shallow breaths. At last, she managed a smile. “I am perfectly well, thank you. A few harsh words never did anyone too much harm.”

“Oh, Kathryn.” He sighed. “Your optimism is fatal.” He twisted towards Imogen. “Have you told her that? Have you told her if she keeps insisting on this *all will work out* set of beliefs she’ll end up to her neck in trouble?”

Imogen’s eyes widened, and she just stared up at him, clearly far more affected by the little show than she let on earlier, “I think, Your Grace, she is already up to her *ears* in trouble. Do you plan to extricate her?”

“Imogen!” Kate hissed.

“I’m only speaking the truth,” Imogen protested. “After today, you must see reason.”

Kate sat back, hating to admit defeat. She grinned tentatively, trying to make light of the terrible situation. “I have been rather stubborn.”

The duke’s dark brows rose. “*Stubborn*, madam? Bullheaded more like.”

Kate scowled up at him. Who was he to talk? He had been just as difficult. “Now see here, I thank you for your assistance, Your Grace, but I hardly think —”

“Kate, close your mouth,” Imogen said quickly. “Unless you wish to be on the first boat to Spain come tomorrow morning.”

That gave Kate pause. She was indeed going to have to leave. It was as simple as that. If she didn’t find a way to fix her damaged reputation, she would either have to stay locked up in her house, or she would have to hie off the continent. “Yes, well, I suppose you have a point.”

“A point?” Darkwell echoed. “Were you present for this debacle, Kathryn?” His face paled as he shook his head, causing his bruises to stand out in sharply. “The countess was one step away from lynching you here in the middle of the park.”

Kate shifted uncomfortably on her carriage seat. “I am not a child, sir. You need not explain how tenuous my situation is.”

Ryder’s jaw tightened as if fighting back some jaded comment. “I shall meet you at your home in shall we say ten minutes time? And we shall discuss what to do.” He didn’t even wait. He just whipped his hunter about and inclined his head, riding off in the direction of her townhome.

Kate sat up straight staring after him. “Imperious—”

“And chivalrous rescuer,” Imogen cut in.

Kate frowned and folded her arms over her chest. “Those were not the words I was going to use.”

However, Imogen was right. He had come to her rescue when no one else would, and it was clear he cared. More than he’d ever let on. In fact, he seemed furious anyone might speak ill against her. For a brief moment, she had been certain he was going to throttle the countess. An event she might pay money to see.

And she had a terrible feeling those bruises were an effect of words exchanged over her. The very thought caused her silly emotions to blossom with false hope.

Even so, that did not give him the right to order her here and there or treat her as a child. She had enough experience with men who saw her as a piece of luggage to be shunted about. It didn't matter that her blood was rushing through her veins, that she could hardly believe she had seen him again and that now he was demanding an audience.

Kate bit down on her lower lip, trying to bring herself back down to reality. He was going to demand marriage. She knew it. Though she was sure he had no desire to make her his wife, he had no choice now after publicly proclaiming himself. And any woman of intelligence would jump at his offer.

But Kate had learned the hard way jumping only resulted in one flying through the air, hurtling to the earth below. And she did not have wings which meant if she was not very careful, she would crash.

Just as she had done before.

CHAPTER 18

*P*acing had become part of his existence since meeting that infuriating woman. Ryder forced himself to stop in front of the library's towering fireplace before he wore a long trench in the polished wood floor.

But damn it, had she no sense?

And her response had hardly been the one he'd been expecting. He was unsure as to why, but somewhere in what remained of his boyish fantasies, he expected her to throw herself into his arms and cling to him, showering him with kisses at his swift ride to her rescue. He'd even considered he might have to wipe a few tears from her frightened face.

Instead, she'd lit up at the sight of him for a few brief moments and then turned into a bristly thistle in the next.

And good God, why had he said *that*? Future duchess? Wife. He'd proclaimed her to be his wife—in front of half the *ton*. There was no going back from that. Despite any vows he'd ever made to Jane, he was about to be married. Again.

He ran his fingers over Jane's ribbon, the fabric now rough from so much attention. Ever so slowly, he untied it and slipped it into his pocket. Even if it was the right thing to do, he couldn't wear it. Not for this conversation. Not when he took Kathryn in his arms.

He glanced at the open door. Listening for any sound, any sound that might indicate she was here.

The part of him he'd long kept under lock and key was elated at the prospect of marrying Kate. Elated in a positively stupid fashion. One would think he was a boy in the first flush of flirtation, when he'd been innocent and the world held an unsurpassable treasure trove of promise. When he hadn't lost those he loved to stupid causes.

But for some damned reason, Kathryn Darrell held happiness, an emotion he was a fair stranger to, out to him like an ephemeral prize. A prize which threatened his very vows to the one person who in life and death had been the center of his world for well over a decade.

Jane's face came to his mind, her soft curls and pale eyes. But the image was fading now. He swallowed, trying not to think about what today's event meant to her memory.

Ryder eyed the decanters of brandy sitting on the Chippendale sideboard and wondered at its presence in a lady's establishment. Then again, he knew Kate had a taste for it. She had a taste for things no good young lady should. She was a walking conundrum. It was what he so liked about her.

In the last few weeks, he'd grown to expect her presence, and he could no longer imagine going on without it. Somehow he could make her see reason that marriage to him was preferable to banishment. And she certainly seemed appalled by a life abroad. And who wouldn't?

Life with the Spanish indeed!

He'd rather skewer himself in the eyeball than put up with those poncing idiots.

Ryder glanced at the open doorway again. He kept listening for the delicate steps of ladies. Where the devil were they? He hadn't ridden that fast ahead.

He caught his reflection in one of the tall gilt mirrors hanging from the wall, and much to his own disgust, he paused. He'd always been thorough in his appearance, but he never really given a damn about how he looked. Until this exact moment. He found himself smoothing down his black silk waist coat and checking his dark wool sleeves for horse hair.

Unromantic though this proposal might be, he was going to do it right. He'd be thorough if it killed him. It was his duty after all.

Finally, footsteps echoed down the hall, and Ryder turned about the room. The last thing he wanted, though he couldn't believe he cared, was to look like he'd been waiting like a nervous school boy. He strode to the fireplace and propped his arm along the green Carrera marble.

Clearing his throat, he waited. It was preposterous that he felt any sort of concern at this meeting. He'd stood on the wrong side of a pistol, fought on the continent and he'd even endured Jane's death.

And yet, Kathryn Darrell managed to awaken a sense of unease in him. It was as if he were standing on a tight rope, that at any moment someone was going to shake.

Kathryn and Imogen bustled through the doorway, and he bit back a curse. What the devil was her friend doing here? "I do believe we are past the need for a chaperone."

The two women exchanged some mysterious female look. Imogen eyed him warily. "Mrs. Darrell asked for my presence."

Ryder drew in a slow breath. Not a week ago, Kathryn had done everything in her power to get him alone, and now she was issuing propriety as if they were at a tea dance. "Is this true?"

She stared him down, daring him to challenge her decision. "Yes."

Well, he'd always been one to live up to a challenge, and he wanted her alone. It would be easier to convince her if he could get her into his arms. It certainly didn't hurt that he damn well wanted his mouth on hers. "Why?"

Clearly annoyed he was pressing this matter, she said tightly, "I wish to retain my good sense."

A smile started at his lips as did a decidedly warm feeling in his abdomen. She was concerned about being alone with him because it would affect her judgment? It was the best possible answer to his question. "I understand, but this is a conversation I think best kept between us."

She glanced towards Imogen and then back towards him. Indecision between what she wanted and what she thought best played across her pale features.

"Come, Kathryn," he said softly. "You have nothing to fear from me. You must know by now my main interest is only in your welfare."

Kathryn stared back at him for a moment, her lips pressing into a concerned line.

It killed him that she hesitated. But what right had he to wish she was completely unreserved in his presence? He certainly kept his fair share of himself locked away.

"As you wish." She clasped Imogen's beringed hand then let her friend go.

Interestingly, as she departed, Imogen threw him a warning stare that spoke volumes for the care of her friend.

The silence lingered between them as he and Kathryn stared at each other like two opposing armies on the brink of treaty or war. Ryder took a step forward, hoping to narrow the breach. "I am sorry for your discomfort this morning."

She shrugged, causing her curled hair to brush her neck. However, the action didn't quite hide the degree of pain to her gesture. "It was my own fault. I should have known I could not go freely about."

It was impossible, hearing the resignation in her bright voice. When he'd first met her, her determination had been like her shield. She'd been unafraid of

anything and though she certainly seemed brave, a little of that innocent hope had worn off under London's harsh pressures.

"If it is your fault then it is equally mine," he said gently.

She frowned. "I don't understand."

"I am an equal partner in our scandal. It simply happens that society is far more kind to the male in these happenings. That doesn't make me less culpable."

"True." She smiled slightly and stepped towards him, her light blue skirts swaying. "But that doesn't change my predicament."

"I think it does." The words felt like marbles in his mouth but he knew it was the right thing to do. And without a doubt, he knew Jane would want him to do what was right. "We must marry."

The smile vanished, and Kate glared at him, her blue-grey eyes a stony color. To his acute frustration, she stepped back and cocked a brow at him. "Must, sir?"

Ryder sighed. "Kathryn, are you going to be spitefully stubborn again and ignore the events of this morning?"

"Spiteful?" she huffed. "I, sir, am never spiteful."

Ryder stared back at her. "Good grief, woman, I could say the sun was yellow and you'd proclaim it green."

She glowered for a moment then the starch went out of her a bit. "I can be difficult, but I simply don't wish to be ordered, Ryder. I have been ordered about my whole life. By men, I might add."

It would never be possible for him to understand what it was like to be a woman, completely at the mercy of a father or husband. But he did know what it was like to be controlled by guilt and grief. "I know how important freedom is to you."

Her frown eased, and she took another step towards him. "You remember."

"Despite appearances, I remember everything you've said or done." God, he wished he could bite his tongue, but the truth just spilled out.

"You know, we were both emphatic about not marrying that night at the opera," she pointed out.

Ryder sighed. "I wish I could tell you differently, but there are many reasons why I think it is a mistake that you should marry me."

Her smile faded again, and her expression grew guarded. "And yet you wish it now. It is very difficult to accept you because your sense of honor demands you assist me."

"Make no mistake, you are. . ." He didn't know how to put her effect on him into words. It was equally maddening and wonderful. She drove him to

distraction then offered him respite from his self-inflicted and well deserved punishments. “You make me want happiness.”

“Oh, Ryder.” She took several slow steps towards him, the rustle of her skirts as hypnotic as the kindness warming her eyes “You deserve happiness. More than anyone I know.”

Ryder swallowed back the retort that she was wrong. He wanted her to agree to marriage, and a recital of his faults was probably not the most intelligent way to ensure her ascent. And yet, could he marry her without her knowing he could never love her, that he could never give her the care a husband should give his wife?

Bile twisted his stomach. “Can you marry me despite—”

“I’ve missed you,” she said softly. “Even your gruffness.”

Relief flooded through him that she stopped the fatal words from passing his lips. Nor had she seen him truly *gruff* as she put it. And if he had his way, she never would. For her sake, he’d force himself out of the darkness that pulled him down so frequently, and he would try to start again. Perhaps he could do it. “I have missed you too, Kathryn.”

“In truth?” she asked. Though she gave him a cheeky grin, there was definite uncertainty in her stance.

Ryder laughed, a rush of sound that echoed up to the ceiling. “God, yes.” He’d never tell her how much and how he’d thought of her night on every waking moment.

She glanced at him from the corner of her eyes. “You know, I had no intention of ever marrying again.”

“Nor I. But sometimes life chooses paths for us.”

“I suppose, but Ryder, I cannot settle into the life of a dutiful wife. I just can’t.” Her beautiful forehead creased with worry, and she clasped her hands in front of her. “Before I was left to rot in the country and had no control over my life. . . I made a very bad mistake putting myself in—” She swallowed as if her dead husband’s name was poison. “In Percy’s hands.”

If the bastard had still been alive, he would have killed him. Slowly. No one had the right to encroach on Kathryn’s beautiful independence nor her sense of self. It was what drew him to her. And any man who tried to take it from her was a coward.

Ryder crossed the room in a few short strides and pulled her against him. He wanted to free her not make her a captive. And God, he wanted to see the light

that would come from her when she had no worries, when she was truly free to be herself. Something she could be as a powerful duchess.

“I have no wish to control you or take your freedom.” He gestured from her to him. “This wasn’t what I wanted, but I find now, that having you all to myself is immensely appealing.”

“To yourself?” she murmured, curving her body instinctively against his.

Ryder looked down on her beautiful face. “Yes.”

He was playing a very dangerous game with his own heart. Her eyes were half closed and her mouth was ever so slightly open, offering herself up to him. It was the most erotic sight he had ever seen.

Without another word, he took her mouth in a hungry kiss. The days of turmoil had taken their toll, and he kissed her without restraint. Refusing to hold back the banked up passion inside him, he sucked her tongue into his mouth and wove a hand into her hair.

She gasped against his mouth and wrapped her arms about his shoulders. Molding herself against him, she parted her thighs allowing him to place his leg between them. She groaned and struggled to bring her body closer to his.

Need hammered his body, awakening him. It was like possession. He had to have her. He had to make her his, and he couldn’t stop until he did.

He tore his mouth away from hers and swung her up into her arms. Her skirts spilled over his hands and caressed his thighs as he tucked her against his chest. Glancing about the room, he looked for any surface that might do.

“Kathryn?” A voice called from the hall.

Ryder groaned and stopped in the middle of the room.

“Yes?” Kate called, her voice definitely deeper with desire.

Imogen cleared her throat, the sound muffled through the closed door. She paused for a moment. “Are you well?”

Kate pressed her face to Ryder’s shirt and stifled a laugh. She drew in a soft breath then lifted her head. “Extremely well.”

“It is rather quiet in there.”

Ryder tensed. Had the damn woman been listening in? His ardor faded a little. “I promise Mrs. Darrell is perfectly safe.”

Ryder jerked his head towards the door as he heard a clear snort. Impertinent woman. Then again, it only showed that she was definitely concerned about his Kathryn, which to his surprise rose the woman in his esteem. But damn it, couldn’t she skive off?

“Have you agreed to marry him then?”

“Ah.” Kate looked up into his eyes. She nibbled her lower lip and stroked a hand down the front of his black wool coat.

His entire world stopped in that moment. He had every advantage. Power, wealth, a reputation that could protect her and yet, he was completely uncertain of her answer. Kathryn was not a typical woman which was why he hoped the next word from her mouth would be ‘yes’.

Kathryn’s lips parted in the most beautiful smile. “Yes.”

“Thank God,” Imogen exclaimed. “Otherwise, I was going to have to uproot myself and grow a fondness for lederhosen. Though I might enjoy an exposed male leg. Still—”

“Is that all?” Ryder demanded, his voice a shade harsher than he intended. But damn it, it had been days since he’d made love to Kathryn. And now that she was going to be his, the only thing stopping him was the meddlesome, if well intentioned, woman in the hallway.

“Oh.” Imogen’s voice rose with a touch of embarrassment. “Certainly. Do carry on.” There was a shuffle of material and then, “Enjoy yourselves.”

Her quick footsteps echoed down the hall, and Ryder shook his head. “She is quite something.”

Kate looked up at him, her eyes glinting with mischief. “You’ve no idea.”

“Now where were we?” he asked, his voice barely a whisper.

Her hand caressed the back of his neck. “I think you were trying to find a place to set me down.”

“So I was.” Damnation, he was on fire for her. His blood was pounding, making rational thought extremely difficult. If he wasn’t careful, he might toss her over his shoulder and carry her off to his cave.

As if she could see the passion mounting in his eyes, she said breathily, “I recommend the carpet in front of the fire.”

He started for the green and white woven carpet. “Whatever my duchess commands.”

She smiled mischievously. “But I’m not yet.”

He stopped just a few feet before the banked fire, unsure if the low burning flames or her body against him was causing the warmth inside him. “Not what?”

“Your duchess, Your Grace.”

Ryder swiftly lowered her to the soft Persian rug and propped himself on his forearms over her. “Oh, but you will be.” He pressed a kiss to her forehead. “Soon,” he whispered, kissing her eye lids. “Very soon.”

“How soon?” she asked, hitching her legs up and slightly apart so he could rest between them.

He resisted the urge to roll on top of her and take her in one claiming thrust. Instead, ever so slowly, he took her silk skirts in his hand and raked them up her legs. She shivered, and he smiled down at her as he let his fingers caress her upper thighs, dipping them to the softest skin, just by her core. “Should I wake the bishop of London from his afternoon nap?”

“Later,” she gasped as his fingers swirled over her hot, wet folds.

“Whenever you desire.” He opened her legs wide, giving him complete access.

She gazed up at him, amazement on her face. “We can do this forever now.”

The words sank in like a terrifying blessing. Whether she knew it or not, he was going to be responsible for her safety and happiness. Without replying, Ryder lowered his mouth to hers, choosing to show how much he wanted her rather than saying it.

In that moment, he knew he failed Jane. But with his vow to her, he’d helped to make amends. And now, now he had Kathryn. No matter what it took. He would find a way to keep the vow of his past and still live his future.

CHAPTER 19

*I*t didn't seem possible that she was going to be married to this man. Yet, it was true. Kate let her fingers lace into his silken hair as he skimmed his lips over her thighs. With the lightest touch, he traced his fingers over her exposed hipbones, and she parted her thighs even wider, tilting her hips to him.

The man allowed her to be totally free. In fact he seemed to encourage it, for as she thrust her hips towards him, he ever so gently flicked his tongue over her most sensitive spot. Kate cried out, and her fingers tightened on his hair, pressing his mouth against her.

He laughed softly, and the vibrations sent waves of pleasure through her lower body.

"You like that?" he murmured against her folds.

"Yes," she panted. "Oh, yes."

Gently, he sucked her hot core into his mouth. The heat and pressure was nigh unbelievable, and Kate looked down at him. It was so erotic seeing his face pressed between her legs. His eyes were closed as if giving her pleasure was the most wonderful thing in the world. His mouth worked her relentlessly, applying pressure then pulling back so she bucked against him.

"Just feel it, Kathryn," he said against her.

She dropped her head back, glorying in the feel of him. She was so wet, and with every caress of his tongue she flew higher and higher. Her free hand dug into the carpet, and her hips shook against his mouth.

But he didn't stop, he just kept swirling his tongue and then he thrust two fingers deep inside her. Kate moaned at the intensity of it, and wave after wave rippled through her until she couldn't think. She watched him, kissing her between her thighs.

To her shock, another pulse of pleasure threw her to a higher wave of intensity. "Please, Ryder. Please."

He drew back ever so slightly, his face flushed with need and his lips dewy with her moisture. He kissed the inside of her thigh, smoothing his lips clean. "What do you want?" he asked as he smoothed a hand down her thigh to her ankle.

“You.”

He nipped at her hip then licked it. “What part of me do you want?”

Swallowing, Kate stared at him not sure if she understood. Did he truly wish her to say it? “I—”

“Tell me, Kathryn.”

“I want your. . .cock.” The words flew out of her, and her cheeks flamed with embarrassment, but at the same time, it turned her hot body even hotter. How could words make her hungrier for him than she already was?

“Where do you want it?”

Kate blinked up at him, half mad with need for him. “I don’t understand.”

He kissed his way up her tightly laced stomach and let his mouth hover over hers. “There is more than one place for it to go.”

Her eyes flared. “What?”

He placed his fingers against her opening and probed lightly. “Here,” he said. “Or you could take it here,” and he lowered his fingers to her bottom.

Her eyes flared at the impossibility of that idea. And then he rubbed his lips against hers and whispered, “Or you could take me in your mouth.”

She moaned as his kiss devoured her. He tasted slightly salty, and she realized that was how she must taste.

Even though she loved his kiss, she moved her hand down between their bodies, cupping his hardness through his breeches. “I can do that?” she asked, as she massaged him.

“Most definitely,” he groaned. “But for now, let me tell you what I want.”

“Yes.” It was surprising to realize that though she was a widow, and she’d already made love to this man, she was basically innocent. But she had a feeling that wouldn’t last long. And frankly, she couldn’t wait.

He unlaced his breeches. “Roll on to your side,” he said gently.

On her side? Why on earth would he want that? But she complied, curiosity now mixed with her need.

He lowered himself down by her back. Lightly, he stroked her bottom then pushed her leg up towards her chest so she was exposed. Kate glanced back over her shoulder, unsure of how he would make this work.

Ryder pulled her hips as tight against his as her skirts would allow, and then he rubbed the head of his cock against her wet heat, starting at her bottom and then moving forward.

Her breath came in sharp pants. It was so shocking and delicious that she found herself, rocking her hips back again.

“Now,” she groaned.

He took her hand and wrapped it around his hard shaft. “Guide me, Kathryn.”

She hesitated for just one moment, amazed at how powerful she suddenly felt. She took him in a firm grip, and he moaned. Opening her slick folds, she pressed him against her opening, and he grabbed her hips and thrust in to the hilt.

A gasp rushed from her throat. She felt so full. And at this angle, his cock stroked a spot she’d never known existed.

As he thrust deep inside her body, she glanced back at him. His face was a mask of pleasure, and he pulled her closer to him, freeing her breasts from her corset as he filled her.

Just when she thought the pressure couldn’t grow any more powerful, he placed his fingers in her mouth. Instinctively, she sucked them and then he pulled away and lowered his hand to between her legs. His now wet fingers met her slick core, and a moan ripped from her throat.

It was too much. The feel of his cock thrusting hard into her body and his fingers circling over her pussy.

“That’s it, Kathryn,” he breathed against her ear. “I love to please you.”

His fingers were relentless, and she reached back gripping his hips as he pumped against her. “Oh god,” she moaned, at a loss for words.

She tossed her head back and forth, unable to stand the knot building inside her.

“Tell me what you need,” he said, his voice ragged.

“I don’t—”

“Do you need to come?” he offered.

“Yes. Oh, yes,” she gasped, her fingers digging harder into his hip. “Please, make me come.”

He increased the speed of his fingers and as he pulled out to just the tip, he pressed down on her pussy and thrust his cock deep inside her.

The world exploded around her, and her breath froze in her throat. His hot seed spilled inside her, and as he shuddered against her body, she opened her mouth in a silent scream. Her inner muscles clasped him, not wanting to let him go, and he groaned.

As they came back from the precipice together, he rested his head against the top of hers and their bodies, sweaty from love making they relaxed into each other as if the connection made them one.

Kate drew in several slow breaths. She could do this. She could make love to him day after day and revel in it. They would be together as friends and as lovers. And she could keep her heart safe.

It didn't matter that she never wanted this moment to end, or that she felt more at home in his arms than anywhere else she'd ever been.

Ryder was marrying her to offer her protection and a chance at happiness. That was all she needed, and she'd find a way to make it up to him, this sacrifice. Yes, she'd be able to keep her heart safe and still have him. She would find a way.



The great quest of Kate's happiness had begun, or at least so it seemed to her. Ryder personally arranged every aspect of their wedding. To her surprise, he seemed born to organize large events, not to mention manipulate the masses into doing exactly as he pleased. Perhaps it was his military training or perhaps it was his glower which seemed to instill an instant desire in anyone around him to improve his mood.

As it was, she stood before the Bishop of London in St. Paul's Cathedral. It was a feat in and of itself to keep herself from laughing at the joy of it all. The nave was packed with the most prestigious members of the *ton* and the Houses of Parliament.

Though it was uncommon to have such a public wedding, it was clear Ryder wanted the entire world to witness their joining. And everything was being done to perfection. The aisle had been lined with a white satin runner and cloth of gold swathed the side chapels.

Her own gown was an ice blue, shot through with silver silk, and crystals had been pressed into the shapes of roses all along her stomacher. But even more astonishing were the jewels Ryder produced. She felt laden down and yet at the same time it was like stepping into a magical world devoted to beauty.

Diamonds and pearls were woven into her hair and ropes of pearls had been strung about her neck, several tight to the base of her throat, and three strands hung in various lengths to her waist.

And her ring. My goodness, she wasn't sure she could even lift her hand, the sapphire surrounded by diamonds was so impressive.

It was so completely different than her last wedding in which no one, not even her father, attended.

Almost entirely because of their scandal, their wedding was the wedding of the year. There was, of course, his infamous dukedom and her fortune, but then there was the fact that the Prince of Wales himself was standing in pink and green brocade in the first row. He looked on with a pleased expression, his quizzing glass at an artful distance as he dabbed his eyes with an embroidered handkerchief.

The prince was renowned for his ability to produce tears.

But Ryder was magnificent. Against all the grandeur, he was simple elegance. His black coat was cut to perfection and made of the finest black moiré. Silver leaves were embroidered along the edging and pockets.

Though many had observed that he still clung to his tradition of an entirely black garb, Kate refused to be daunted. It was a habit he had had for many years. Habits were hard to break, but one day, she'd see him in color.

They knelt together, Ryder's firm grasp a reassuring anchor in this tumultuous moment. She'd sworn never to wed again, but here she was. In the end, all that truly mattered was that she retain her senses and not prove a girlish ninny.

All would turn out well.

And so when, in a fog, she heard the bishop say her name, she found the ability to say, "I do."

To her surprise, she realized Ryder had been holding his breath. She looked up at him and smiled. Surely, he had not thought she'd come this far only to turn tail and run from the church. Oh no, she was not one to retreat.

He squeezed her gloved hand and repeated the vows the bishop recited.

And in a trice, well not really, the bishop did rabbit on and on in a drearily emphatic voice about the importance of cleaving towards one husband, and she could have sworn he spent the better half of the sermon, pointing out certain ladies in the congregation, they were married.

At last, his breath gave out, and he gave the final blessing.

The prince applauded, then did everyone else. He minced forward, waving his handkerchief which sent the diamonds upon his salmon pink coat shimmering. "Well done." He took Kate's hand and kissed it. "Beautiful, madam. Absolutely beautiful. Could watch a sermon all day if you were before the bishop."

Kate bit back a grin and curtsied as deep as she might under the weight of her new jewels. "It is an honor simply to be in your presence, Your Highness."

“Flattery, Lady Darkwell. Flattery,” trilled the prince. “But who wouldn’t want it from such a lady.” He clapped Darkwell on the back. “Lucky man.” The prince looked about then rubbed his pudgy hands together. “To the wedding breakfast, what?”

Ryder inclined his head, an amused expression which one might see used when regarding a spoiled yet charming child on his face. “Certainly, Your Majesty.”

“Good. Good.” The prince clapped his hands and the organ rang out.

With the prince leading the way, Kate and Ryder made their way down the center of the nave and out onto the steps of St. Paul’s. The bells began to peal, and Kate could hardly believe it was all happening. A year ago, she’d never even dreamed the true splendors of London. Now, she was not only here, but at the very center of it.

Which of course was quite a change even from the previous week where she had barely been able to leave the house. And better still, she didn’t have to follow Ryder about, trying to see him. No, he was her husband now. They’d live under the same roof, and she’d chosen to believe he would be different than Percy. That she would see him every day.

She couldn’t cease beaming.

“Happy, Lady Darkwell?” Ryder asked, his hand on her lower back guiding her carefully down the steps.

“Very.” She might not have his heart or his love. She might never truly ever have him. All things she would have allowed herself to want years ago, before she learned how fragile the heart was in another’s hands. But she had this. The beginning of a friendship unlike any she had ever known. And that, that would somehow have to be enough.

CHAPTER 20

The Duke of Aston doffed his big black hat decked with red feathers and gave his tiger grin. “My invitation was lost, no doubt, in the dubious London postal system.” He shrugged, his gold buttons winking in the morning light. “An oversight I corrected.”

Ryder scowled. An oversight, his ass. He’d firmly planned on a life free of mad pirates.

Aston clapped him on the back. “One must not be daunted by such trifles as invitations, my lad.”

Why the hell did he call him that? Did he look like a lad?

Unfortunately, due to the fact it was his wedding day, Ryder couldn’t quite manage a formidable glower. “Your presence is a thorn in my side.”

“Ah, yes. But every thorn has its rose.”

“I had no idea you boasted petals, Aston,” Ryder drawled.

Aston laughed unperturbed by Ryder’s less than affable welcome. “No. No petals. But I do love a good flower. And your new wife, I’d say, is quite the blossom of the garden.”

Ryder immediately turned his attention to Kathryn who stood in a circle of ladies, who just a week ago would have thrown rotting cabbage at her. Now, they ooded and ahed over her jewels and courted her friendship as if she was a Princess Royal.

Which was just exactly as Ryder planned.

The *ton* was damn well going to get down on their knees and kiss Kathryn’s toes before he was done. With him as her husband, no one was ever going to hurt her again. And he’d cut the bastard—female or male—to ribbons who tried.

Aston prodded him with his elbow. “Do tell me how you arranged the breakfast to take place here at Carlton House.”

Ryder arched a brow at the bastard’s cheek. “The Prince and I happen to be quite close.”

Aston snorted. “Come now. You’re prickly as a hedgehog and close to no one, save that politician, Hunt.”

Ryder eyed the man with a new degree of interest. He was observant for a blustering peacock. In truth, he had agreed to pay off a large degree of the prince's debts with his perfumer. No small cost given the prince's obsession with scents.

"Fine, then keep your secrets to yourself." Clapping on his big hat, a ridiculous size for any man, Aston gave him a courtly bow. "Now, I shall go and give your wife my good wishes and my sincerest affection."

"You give her anything but a handshake and I'll pull your balls through your nostrils."

"Vivid imagery. But rest assured, I am completely trustworthy." And he was off like a three masted ship at sail.

Ryder folded his arms across his broad chest. Trustworthy, his arse. The man was about as trustworthy as a walk on quicksand.

"What the devil is he doing here?" Hunt asked, two glasses of claret in his hands.

"My sentiments exactly. Apparently, one doesn't need an invitation when one's a sodding pirate."

"Rumors."

"Take one look at the bastard and tell me you don't see him prodding virgins down the plank."

Hunt gave Aston a once over. The man was currently cooing over Kathryn's ring.

"Hmmm." Hunt sipped his claret, his eyes narrowing. "You'd better keep an eye on her jewels. Old habits die hard, I'm sure."

"I'll stomp him into the marble first."

Hunt handed him the other glass. "Here, you're scowling far too much for a man just married. Your wife will be bound to notice."

Ryder blinked, astonished that he was letting his irritation show to such a degree. He took the claret and took a quick swig of the rich wine. "Is it so wrong to wish everything to go perfectly?"

"How much perfection could you want?" Hunt gestured at the tables of food and drink that stretched down the long gallery and curved out towards the conservatory.

"It's enough?" Ryder asked, his voice surprisingly tense.

Hunt coughed. "Enough? Good god man, there's a full orchestra and you built an indoor pool with water lilies, swans and all."

“Mmm.” Ryder took another drink. In hindsight, that could have gone badly if he hadn’t prepared. “It’s a good thing I hired keepers.”

“Though I dearly would have loved to see one of the swans fly at the good Countess of Carmine.” A rueful smile curved Hunt’s lips. “She’s wearing enough feathers for one of the male birds to grow confused.”

The very mention of the woman turned his stomach.

Hunt turned to him, giving most of the room his back. “Did you explain to her?”

Ryder’s grip tightened on his glass. Out of habit, he was tempted to touch Jane’s ribbon, but he left it off for the wedding. The first time, he’d gone more than an hour without it. “And what should I explain?”

Hunt pinned him with an impatient look. “About Jane, you dunce.”

Ryder considered lying, but Hunt was too smart for that. He was onto truth like a bloodhound. “No.”

“And when she starts asking questions?”

“Won’t happen. Besides I doubt she’d be interested in my past marriage.” He sounded like a fool, but he couldn’t bear putting Jane and Kathryn in the same thought. No matter how he reasoned with it, he felt like he was betraying both.

“Your wife is a font of questions. You do realize this?”

Unfortunately, Hunt was right. Kate’s curiosity might be rivaled by the scientists at the Royal Academy but only by the merest of degrees. “I will deal with her questions when they arise.”

At that exact moment, as though she felt his inner turmoil, Kate turned towards him. Her grey eyes, cool and reflective, were alight with happiness. His heart tightened at her expression.

God, how was he going to keep distant from her? Every part of him urged to let her in. No, he corrected himself. Not the part of him that held Jane’s hand as she slipped away.

“You know,” Hunt said softly, eyeing his starched cuff. “I have seen few couples look at each other the way you and Kathryn do.”

Ryder shook his head tightly. “We have an understanding of each other. Nothing more.”

“Perhaps—”

“No. She has no interest in love either. And that’s for the best.” Ryder cleared his throat, needing to get away from this line of conversation. “Now, if you will excuse me, I am neglecting my wife.”

Ryder made his way through the crowd of ladies's wide skirts and gentlemen making merry. Though several people extended well wishes to him, he barely acknowledged them. He only had eyes for Kathryn.

As he came up beside her, he leaned in and said softly in her ear. "Is all well?"

Her lips tilted in her special smile. "It could not be better. Thank you for such a beautiful day."

The pleasure at her enjoyment hummed through him, and he had to resist taking her in his arms in front of the *ton*. He doubted they would turn a blind eye to that.

Imogen swept towards them, and Ryder stepped closer to Kathryn. "Your friend looks in high spirits."

In fact, she looked in *very* high spirits. Pink stained her cheeks, and her coif had drooped, a feather bobbing against her cheek. A glass of champagne was fixed in her hand, but she was swinging it about. "Darlings!" she exclaimed.

"Too much punch," his wife confessed.

Damn, but he liked how that sounded. *His wife*.

Imogen stopped in front of them, swaying ever so slightly. "Lovely party."

"Thank you," Ryder said, unsure if he should offer the woman his arm, but she seemed to be having a fine time.

She leaned in close, her eyes wide as if she was about to confess a secret. Crooking a finger at them, she whispered, "But what are you still doing here?"

Imogen waved her champagne glass at Ryder and giggled. "I know what I'd be doing right now, if I'd just married a lovely, lovely duke like you."

"Imogen," Kate hissed.

"'Tis true," Imogen said firmly.

Ryder wasn't sure if he should hug or throttle the woman, because she was absolutely right. He wanted Kathryn alone and to himself right now. "Perhaps it's time we depart," he said, his voice suddenly rough to his own ears.

Kathryn drew in a quick breath, and her breasts pressed to her corset. "I do believe you're right."

"Shoo," Imogen said, waving a jeweled hand at them. "Off you go." She pressed her hand to her pink cheek. "Now, where is that gorgeous bit of tough, Aston, got to?"

Kathryn took Imogen's hand and whispered to her.

Ryder could have sworn he heard the words *no closets*, but that was absurd. Then again, considering Imogen, perhaps it was good advice.

Nodding like a well-warned child, Imogen headed off. He peered through the crowd looking for the blasted pirate. Of all things he was standing with Mrs. Barton. Ryder shook his head. Between Aston's enthusiasm, Mrs. Barton's sense of adventure and Imogen's willingness, they'd no doubt go off to some obscure part of the house for a game of sausage, sausage, who's got the sausage.

The idea didn't bear thinking about. Then again if they enjoyed themselves and, more to the point, didn't get caught who was he to gainsay their fun?

He had to admit, the more he thought about it, the more he agreed with Hunt. Aston would make an interesting addition to the Duke's Club. But not now. Perhaps never. Perhaps they'd all be lucky and the man would just hie himself back to the Indies.

Ryder offered his arm to his wife. "Shall we?"

Beaming up at him, Kathryn slipped her hand onto his forearm. "I'd love nothing more."

CHAPTER 21

“*I* am perfectly capable of walking, Your Grace,” Kate lilted, not quite able to contain her excitement.

“I’m aware of that, Your Grace,” Ryder intoned with teasing gravity.

“And yet you have a frequent habit of carrying me about.” Kate clasped her hands around his neck, unsure of which way to look. Should she turn to the massive, four storied house just off Green Park that made Spencer house, just a few yards away, look like a hovel?

Or should she look at the wonderful man who had given it to her?

“I love to carry you about,” he said confidently as he strode up the granite steps and through the double red doors of their new residence.

The servants, all in sapphire and crisp white uniforms, stood in a long line awaiting them. But Ryder ignored them and whispered in her ear, “It usually means I’m going to have my way with you.”

Her cheeks burned, and she smiled at the old man she’d run past that first night she met Ryder. “Your butler, I presume.”

“No, Kathryn. *Our* butler.” Ryder gave the old man a nod. “Isn’t that right, Grieves?”

“Most certainly, Your Grace.” The old fellow lifted his shaggy brows and bowed slightly. “And may I say what a pleasure it is to have a Duchess and to see His Grace in such good spirits.”

Ryder kept walking, his mission clear. But Kate looked over her shoulder and threw the old man, and the rest of the gaping servants, a smile. “Thank you! I look forward to meeting you all.”

And then Ryder started taking the steps towards the upper regions of the house two at a time.

She giggled, amazed at his strength. It was impossible to get a good look at the many paintings hanging upon the walls or the ornateness of the crenellated ceiling. The one thing she did see was the wine-red and gold rug lining the staircase and the ebony balustrade.

On the second floor he turned to the right wing of the stairs and started down the hall. Window after window poured in glorious sunlight causing the crystal on

the wall sconces to shimmer like rainbow-colored mist.

“Which one is our room?” she asked.

He cuddled her closer to his chest. “Officially, we each have our own room.”

“Oh. I see.” She didn’t know why she expected any different. They weren’t in love. For goodness sake, she and Percy hadn’t even shared a house. And after their first unpleasant experience, nor had she wished to share a bed. But Ryder was different. She loved the headiness of his spicy scent and the way his strong muscles wrapped her up in a blanket of security.

“A formality I have no intention of keeping.” His smile turned wolfish. “What fun could I have in a bed by myself?”

Her spirits lifted right back up, and she forced herself to recall this was a marriage where she should simply take things as they came. She couldn’t go about acting like a silly twit expecting hearts and flowers. “My thoughts exactly.” She wiggled her brows at him. “Now where is it?”

“The far room at the end of the hall.” He tilted his head down towards her. “Why do you ask, considering you have such excellent transportation?”

“Because.” Kate tickled his ribs, and to her delight, he staggered and choked on a laugh. “I might grow old at this pace. Do you think we shall reach it before my dotage?”

“You evil wench.” He laughed. “Impatient, are you?”

Kate nodded, a smile tilting her lips. “Most definitely.”

Gripping her tightly, he ran down the hall, his boots thudding against the carpet.

Laughter bubbled from her lips. “Stop. Stop!” Though she had absolutely no wish for him to cease.

“Not until you’re in bed where you belong.” And he charged down the hall, halting just before an open white and gold door. He took one step through and kicked it shut.

Kate bit her lower lip, anticipation humming through her veins. At the center of the room stood a huge four poster bed covered in white silk pillows and a goose down throw. Without hesitating he crossed the room and tossed her face down onto the soft mattress. She turned her head towards him, savoring the gorgeous bed beneath her and beckoned with her eyes.

His chest rose and fell in deep breaths as his gaze roamed over her sprawled on the bed.

“Are you coming, Your Grace?” she asked, stretching ever so slowly. “This bed is rather big for one.”

Ryder's eyes darkened with desire, and he pounced. As he rolled beside her, he crawled onto his knees and pulled her skirts up in a few swift tugs. With surprising force, he had her onto her hands and knees then smoothed his hands over her bottom and thighs. "So, beautiful." And then he bent down and placed an open mouthed bite on her bum.

Kate gasped at the shock. It had hurt, but only a little, and it sent the most delicious sensations racing through her. Instinctively, she tilted her hips back, offering herself to him.

Good lord, she could take him right now. She was sure if she reached back and touched herself she would be wet and swollen with desire.

"Not yet," Ryder said firmly. "Now, my sweet, on your back."

Kate complied immediately, ready for anything he might propose. Ryder lowered himself over her and took her mouth.

She pressed against him, lifting her back from the bed as she drew deeper and deeper kisses from him. But he pressed her back down and soon they were struggling for air as they turned and twisted on the bed.

Rolling over and over, Ryder stopped and pinned her arms down with one hand. "I think it's time we free you of all these clothes."

What she really wanted was for Ryder to part her thighs and give her his long, hard length, but he was determined to make this last, and she certainly wasn't going to protest. "I am rather warm."

His forehead creased in mock concern. "It is my primary duty to make you comfortable."

Gazing up at him, she had to ignore the clamoring of her heart at the way his black hair fell boyishly across his forehead. "Proceed then, please."

With her arms stretched high above her, her breasts threatened to spill free from her corset and the prone position was surprisingly appealing. She found herself hardly able to wait for him to undress her. "Faster."

He laughed, though it was strained now. His deft fingers worked at the pins that held her stomacher in place. He worked them free and pulled her bodice off and tossed it the floor. The decadence of throwing such an expensive garment to the ground didn't escape her, and the fact he wanted her so much as not to care only increased her own need.

Her skirts were a prison, and she wanted free of them.

"Allow me," he said roughly as he undid the ties of her heavy skirts.

The rich fabric slid down her body, layer after layer until she lay in nothing but her jewels, her short chemise, stockings and her corset.

As he stared down at her virtually naked lower body, he growled, "God, I want to devour you."

The thought of him feasting on her sent a jolt of pleasure straight between her thighs. "I'd like to be devoured."

"Would you now?" he asked, as his hand went to her corset. He studied the soft curve of her cunny for a moment then flipped her onto her stomach. Her hands free now, she grasped the white pillowy blanket.

He cursed as he pulled at the strings, but finally he peeled the beautiful blue brocade corset, and she moaned at the feel of release. It was delicious as air kissed her skin.

"No more prisons." And he tugged the corset free, flinging it to join her pile of clothes. His fingers trailed back and then slid her chemise up her legs and he tugged it forward and up over her head.

"Mmm," she moaned. After the constriction of her undergarments, the feel of the soft sheets against her breasts was shocking in the extreme, but more than anything, she wanted his hands and mouth on her. When she tried to turn, he placed a hand to her back.

"Patience." He brushed her curls aside and just above the ropes of pearls he'd given her, he pressed a kiss to her neck.

The ropes of jewels pressed in against her breasts and stomach as she stretched into him. Lord, it would be a crime if she broke them. She reached up to unfasten the clasp.

"Leave them," he whispered against her skin as he raked his lips along her shoulder blades. "I want to see my duchess in all her glory."

His duchess. Kate shivered. The words were as exciting as any touch. "Your pleasure is my pleasure."

Ryder looked down at her, his eyes soft and hot. Gently, he lifted one of her thighs towards her waist so her core was exposed. He leaned down and whispered against her ear as he plunged two fingers into her wet heat, "I'm glad to hear it, love."

Kate jerked against him and dug her fingers into the sheets. It was so cruel, the pleasure his fingers caused, because it wasn't enough. All it did was make her long for his hard length.

As he probed her with his fingers, he leaned forward and turned her face to the side. Though the angle was difficult, he slipped his tongue into her mouth and let his velvet softness take her.

She moaned and pushed her bum back towards his hips.

But he was having none of it. He broke the kiss. "Little wanton, you must wait. On your back again."

Kate blew out a frustrated breath and turned over.

It took her a moment to realize he was still clothed. She let out a little cry of protest and reached up to push at his coat. "Ryder."

He laughed softly and yanked his coat and waistcoat off.

"More off," she said huskily, and she reached up with her leg and teased his shirt with the tips of her toes. "I want to see all of you."

His black eyes flared, and he took her foot and pressed a kiss to the arch and then to her astonishment, he opened his mouth and lightly bit down. She cried out at the intensity of it. For goodness sake, it was only her foot but it sent the most wonderful shocks up her legs.

Ryder released her foot and tugged at his clothes, his fingers no longer quite as skilled. Tormenting him, Kate raised herself up on her elbows and opened her thighs so every part of her was exposed to him. "Hurry, Your Grace," she purred. "I've waited long enough."

His breeches hit the floor, and Kate licked her lips at the sight of his hard, erect length. It was so large she hardly believed it could fit inside her. The head was swollen and bobbing in her direction as if it knew exactly where she was.

Kathryn drew in a slow breath, knowing exactly what she wanted to try. He was standing just beside the bed but that still left him too tall to do what she wanted. Before he could say anything, she swung her legs over the side of the bed and stood before him. Ever so slowly, she placed her hands on his muscled chest, loving the feel of the strength beneath her hands. She let them trail lower.

Glancing up at him through her lashes she asked his own question. "What do you want?"

A muscle twitched in his jaw, and his cock bobbed against her thigh. "What do you want, Kathryn?"

She raised her brows ever so slightly, half afraid to say it aloud, but emboldened by her experiences with him. "I want you in my mouth."

His chest expanded as he drew in a sharp breath. And then his strong hands came up to her shoulders and very gently, he guided her down onto her knees.

She was barely tall enough, but from this angle, all she could focus on was his hard shaft. It was a bit intimidating actually, and suddenly she wondered at the wisdom of this course, but she wanted to taste him and feel him. Tentatively, she reached out and ran her nails along his thighs. He groaned, and his hands tightened on her shoulders.

A smile tilted her lips. There was something empowering about the pleasure she could give him. Ever so gently, she kissed his hipbone and to her shock, his cock twitched towards her. Bold now, Kate took his length in her hand, her fingers barely able to wrap around it. It was so hot, velvet and hard. She glanced down at the tip and the drop of dew in the little slit. Without thinking, she bent her head and licked it.

He jerked towards her, and his hands wove into her hair, pulling her face closer. Pleased she could make him feel so intensely, she drew as much of his length as she could into her mouth.

“Oh God, Kathryn,” he hissed. “Christ, yes.”

It took her a moment, but she began a rhythm, her hand on the lower part of his shaft and her mouth sliding up and down. She sucked at the tip, loving the feel of its velvety strength. He shuddered, his legs shaking as he clearly fought to keep control.

He began to thrust, shallow little thrusts into her mouth, and she had to keep her lips wide so she could take him. She matched his movements, licking his length and swirling her tongue around his head.

His head dropped back, and he cupped her cheeks, guiding her rhythm. When she gently tongued the slit at the head again, moist with his salty taste, he groaned and stopped her. He grabbed her arms and tugged her back up to him. He cupped her face in his palms then lowered his mouth over hers.

“On your knees, sweetheart.” And he easily guided her up onto the mattress.

Kate glanced back over her shoulder as he pulled her hips up towards him. He mounted the bed and parted her thighs with a knee. He rubbed the tip of his cock against her nub and she cried out. The movement spread her own moisture over her folds and she wiggled back, needing. “Please. Now.”

“Yes. Now.” He grabbed her hips and slammed his hard length inside her.

Kate almost came at the hard intrusion, but her body was completely ready for him. And as he pounded against her, his strong grip keeping her in place, she glanced back at him. It was so thrilling the sight of him taking her body. His face was locked in concentration.

Bracing herself on her elbows, Kate lowered herself to the mattress so only her hips were up in the air. Instantly, she cried out. The angle sent his cock rubbing at her most sensitive spot. Her mouth opened as she gasped at each powerful thrust.

And then his finger circled and pressed against her nub. She let out a shocked moan, burying her face into the bed as she came over and over again,

her body speeding towards unstoppable pleasure.

He jerked against her, his breath harsh and his voice rough as he called out her name. His thrust came faster and faster till she felt his hot seed spill inside her.

After a moment, he leaned forward, resting his broad chest against her back. To her shock, he was still hard inside her. Biting her lower lip, Kate tightened her muscles around his cock, and he shook.

“God woman, you’re amazing.”

She smiled, her body completely liquid under him. He slid his cock out of her, and she moaned in protest.

“Still, hungry?”

In truth, she wasn’t sure she could take anymore, but he felt so marvelous.

When he gently turned her, she eyed his hard cock, slick with their mixed pleasure. “You’re still. . .?”

Ryder smiled down at her, his body less tense. “I’ve been hard since I met you, and I don’t think that will change any time soon.”

Kate reached up and cupped the side of his face. Ryder kissed her palm then lowered her hand to his slick shaft. “You don’t think we’re done yet, do you?”

“We aren’t?”

“Oh no, darling. That was just the beginning.” As if to prove his point, Ryder laid down beside her and palmed her breasts.

She arched into his hand, her body awake and immediately heating for him.

“See, my love, you’re not ready to be done.”

Kate swallowed at the words *my love*. They were just a term of endearment, no different than darling, but they tugged at her heart nonetheless. She couldn’t let herself think anything more of them, even if she ached to. She’d been down that road, and she was not going to go down it again.

“Kiss me,” she said, urgency deepening her voice.

Instead of taking her mouth, he bent his dark head and took her nipple into his mouth.

She grabbed his head, his hair sliding against her fingers. Her nipples tightened into hard, needy points. And in answer, her core throbbed.

He had just used her thoroughly, but she knew without a doubt, she could take him again. His mouth worked wonders over her sensitive breasts. He pressed them together and flicked his tongue over one nipple then the next. Then as if to torture the oversensitized flesh, he nibbled gently on the hard peaks and

then applied slightly harder pressure until she cried out. She dug her hand into his hair, pulling him closer.

“I think it’s time for me to kiss other places.” And true to his word, he kissed his way down to the mound between her thighs.

Kate stared at him, trying not to let her heart take over. She could control herself. It didn’t matter that he made her feel like she was the most loved person in the entire world. She would remember he offered her the best thing he could, happiness free of complications. And she would seize every last little bit she could.

CHAPTER 22

*D*amn, but having sex with Kathryn set fire to his soul. And he knew why, though he didn't want to admit it. He wasn't just having sex with her. He was making love to her body.

He wanted to give her pleasure until she could take no more. Ryder kissed the soft curls just above her pussy and drank in the salty feminine scent. It was erotic, the scent of their love making. He gently parted her thighs and crawled back so he was resting on the steps leading up to the bed. Impatiently, he tugged her towards him so her hips were just on the edge.

With one hand, he hooked her legs around his shoulders. With the other, he pressed her hips down, keeping her in place. She was so beautiful. The silky folds of her sex were wet with hunger.

Hunger for him.

For a moment, he just stared down at her, savoring the knowledge that he gave her pleasure and that no other man was going to give her pleasure again.

Gently, he slicked his fingers over her folds, and she shimmied against him. Ryder smiled then bent his head. Ever so slightly, he lingered above her then flicked his tongue out over her nub. She gasped for breath and bucked against his face. A low laugh rumbled from his chest.

"That pleases you?"

She wove a hand in his hair and urged him down.

"I'll take that as a yes." And then he ran his lips back and forth over her, building the pressure and the friction. Her muscles tightened, and her hips lifted off the bed as she reached towards him.

He sucked her into his mouth, loving the salty taste of her. God, he loved the fact she was marked by their lovemaking. He could spend all day taking that in. Licking her like sweet summer ice, he pressed then retreated.

Her head tossed back and forth on the bed. Closing his eyes, he focused on the feel of her against his lips and tongue, hot and sweet, ready for him. He wanted her wet. Intensely wet.

He drove his tongue into her entry, and she shuddered, her thighs tightening about his head. God, he loved how passionate she was. Finally, he couldn't take

the thundering of his blood and the growing hardness of his cock, and he climbed up her body and pulled her back up the bed.

“Tell me what you want.” His voice was barely more than a rough whisper.

Pink stained her cheeks, and her mouth was half open. She slid her hands to his shoulders and down his back. “I want you.”

The words might have meant something else coming from a different woman, but he wouldn’t allow himself to think about that. Instead, he gave her exactly what she asked. Ryder slid his cock along the wet flesh and then he paused at her back entry and probed ever so slightly.

Her eyes widened, and her body tensed. “What are you—” She gasped and bit down on her lower lip.

As he slid his cock in ever so slightly, he flicked his fingers over her pussy, and she grabbed hold of him. “It’s too much.” She moaned. “Too much.”

“You don’t like it?” Though he could tell from the color of her cheeks and the way she moaned she did.

“I don’t know,” she breathed.

“For later, then,” he said gently. He slid his cock with aching slowness back into her core.

She sighed and folded her legs and arms around him. Ryder’s heart slammed in his chest. It was as if she was wrapping her body around him and offering him safety.

He gave himself blindly over to the feeling.

He propped himself on his elbows and took her in slow thrusts, until she was rising to meet him. He glanced down and managed to catch her gaze. Pure wonder lit her face.

“I-I didn’t know it could be like this,” she whispered.

Ryder wrapped her in his arms. “Oh, Kathryn. Neither did I.” And he meant it. Nothing had ever felt like this.

And then they were coming together their bodies liquid heat as they moved in one rhythm.

Her thighs tightened about his waist, pulling him even closer to her core. And he rested his head against the pillow, his face buried against her curling hair.

As her fingers dug into his back and her muscles tightened around him, he couldn’t hold back and he pulled out to the tip then thrust in deep one last time before he spilt his seed. Pleasure erupted inside him, hurtling through his body, and he held her tight, gasping for air.

The wave faded and he thrust as deep as he could, letting his head rest against her womb. He felt completely drained. Somehow Kathryn had taken him into her and made him feel something he never had. He felt as if maybe, just maybe, there was a place for him in this world and that Hell was a place he could turn his back on.



Kate nestled closer to Ryder, amazement leaving her completely at ease. In fact, the house could fall down around her and she probably wouldn't notice. He tucked them into the covers. Now, she was pressed against his hard body, her cheek resting against his shoulder and one arm draped over his chest.

She traced her hand up and down his strong arm, avoiding the thought that he wasn't wearing the pale ribbon. That he always removed it when they made love. The very idea of it seemed forbidden, and she had no wish to touch darkness tonight, not when so much happiness surrounded them.

In turn, he wrapped one arm about her, keeping her close to him. Kate glanced up, only getting a view of his black stubbled chin. "I do believe this is the first time we've succeeded in finding a bed."

He paused for a moment then laughed. "We certainly haven't done things by rule. Rule is rather boring, don't you think?"

"Rules are for people without imaginations or a sense of determination."

He tapped his finger to the tip of her nose. "And you have quite the determination."

She tilted her head back and kissed his fingers. "Thank you?" she asked, not entirely sure it was a compliment.

"Kathryn," he said, cuddling her closer. "Your determination is one of your most winning traits. Without it you'd still be in Shropshire." He paused. "In truth, how did you determine to come to London?"

"Truthfully?" She wasn't sure how he'd react. Most people would think it rather pathetic, even if she had to be bold to achieve her desires.

"I long to hear the tale. After all, the ending though surprising, has turned out rather well."

She kissed his chest, loving the feel of his warm skin. It wasn't going to be easy to relay this, but it was probably best he understood her relationship with Percy and why she refused to let herself be weak. She drew in a long breath preparing for the story.

“You know,” he said gently, “if it causes you pain, I don’t need to hear it now.” He cupped her cheek. “I would never want to cause you pain.”

Kate blinked half afraid she was about to feel tears sting her eyes. “No. I’d like to tell you.” She shifted closer to him, if that was possible. “I was lonely, is all. Very. And I had no companions except for a very old and proper lady. And Percy came to call. My father hated Percy almost on sight and disapproved of the match. He made it clear I was being a fool. After all, I had a massive fortune and such a young, romantic man as Percy could never want me, someone rather plain, for anything but my money.”

“Kathryn, you are anything but plain,” Ryder said, his voice rough. “Your father should be shot. You are valuable in your own right.”

“No,” she whispered. “He was right. Percy, with his boyish good looks and charm, convinced me he loved me, quite thoroughly.” She smiled in the darkness, though she felt no amusement at her own stupidity. “I allowed myself to be carried away with thoughts of love. I married Percy. And let us just say he thought a wife should be pure and find no pleasure in the act.” She swallowed recalling his grunting over her and the blessed quickness of his pawing. Though she tried not to, she could recall a few rough squeezes and searing pain as he’d stuck himself unceremoniously into her tight body.

“I’d like to kill him.” Ryder’s voice cut through the air with surprising intensity.

Kate couldn’t help it. She laughed lightly against his chest. He was being so kind listening to her. “Luckily, he’s already dead.”

“Skewering wasn’t painful enough for him.”

Her heart warmed at Ryder’s obvious displeasure on her account. “True. In any case, after a week he made it clear he found my intelligence appalling, my face to be plain and that the only appealing thing about me was my fortune. Sadly, and luckily for me, Percy was not aware how savvy my father was.”

“He protected your money.”

“Mmmm. We were only allowed an allowance of ten thousand a year.”

“Still a substantial sum.”

“Percy was furious.” She could still feel the crack of his hand when he returned from his lawyers. “He went to London, and I never saw him again.”

“And you were all alone.”

“Yes.”

Ryder was silent for several moments, then he said quietly, “The country can be quite dreary.”

It had very nearly conquered her usually joyful spirits, what with the silence and rain for days on end. “Oh, yes. And I had days to contemplate the fact I condemned myself to my situation. I did have one luxury though.

“My father, though he was still furious with me and would not see me for going against his wishes, loved my sense of learning. He arranged for all the London papers to be delivered to my home. It was a godsend.”

“You must be very well-versed on the nation’s affairs,” Ryder quipped.

Kate smiled at his attempt at humor and gently slapped his shoulder. “I am and of those abroad. But you know the parts I read with most relish?”

He let out a long suffering sigh. “I’m almost afraid.”

“And you should be. I read the gossip columns with a great deal of satisfaction. I lived life through them, imagining myself to be one of the scandalous people who did as they saw fit. And may I say, you were quite an inspiration.”

“Oh god,” he groaned.

“I read of your escapades with the ladies and dashing doings with the men and thought how I’d like to meet you.”

“And from that you arrived on my door?”

“Not entirely.” This was the bit she was most uncertain about confessing. Kate drew in a quick breath, then rushed out, “Two ladies came down from London. One of them, quite a titter, relayed a bit of sport you’d given her.”

Ryder flung an arm up over his head, tucking it beneath his neck. “Oh, Kathryn, I’m not sure I want to hear this.”

She eyed him the dark, only making out his strong profile. “I don’t need to continue.”

He kissed the top of her head and squeezed her shoulder. “Go on.”

“She said you’d been quite handy when she’d been accosted in the park and you’d joined her in her carriage. Heaven, she’d said. Utter heaven.”

Ryder drew in a big breath then let it out in a whistle. “This has to be the strangest conversation a husband and wife have ever had. You wanted me due to reports from another woman.”

She frowned. “You must understand, I’d only had unpleasant experiences and with one man. And it. . .” She tried to think of words to describe how horrible it had been without revealing how little control she had.

“I think I should dig Darrell up and cut his guts out.”

“There’s no need.” Though she couldn’t hide her own happiness at his care of her. “The worms have done it for you. At any rate, I couldn’t imagine heaven

with a man. But the lady was quite adamant that was what you'd given her. It became very important to me that I also experience it. All I wanted was one night with a man who could make me feel pleasure. I wanted to know life was wonderful and not the depressing never ending stretch of loneliness I had known."

Ryder leaned in towards her. "You're very surprising, Kathryn."

She blinked against the darkness, not sure what that meant. "I don't understand."

"You never complain. For the most part, you always seem happy and yet you've had a sad life."

Kate bit her lower lip. She'd fought so hard to not let the pain of her life with Percy overtake her happiness. "One can either laugh or cry. I choose laughter. It's much better for one's soul, don't you think?"

"I don't know," he said, his voice a little deeper than before.

"I made a decision when Percy died that I would live my life without looking back. And I haven't." But it hadn't been easy leaving that girl behind, the one who had done as her father ordered and who accepted her husband's dislike with pained resignation.

"You're truly a wonder, darling."

"Thank you." She glanced up at him. Given all the trouble she put him through, she asked, "Is that a compliment?"

"Yes, Kathryn. More women should be like you."

"More women should learn from my mistakes," she said gravely. "I certainly have."

"And what have you learned?"

She hesitated. Could she tell him? Could she tell him that even on her father's death bed, he called her a fool and that he made it clear he felt no sympathy for her since she'd been foolish enough to believe in love? "It doesn't really matter. All that matters is I'm here now."

Ryder remained silent and then he rolled onto his side.

The sudden loss of his body was sharply painful. Had she angered him? It wasn't as if he had ever bared his soul to her. Kathryn stared up at the ceiling, trying not to read more into his actions than was there. But despite herself, she couldn't help wanting the heat of him.

And then he reached backward and took her arm, pulling her to spoon against his back. He tucked her arm around his middle. Sighing with relief, Kate rested her face against his broad back. Though she didn't truly understand it, she

hated the idea of him closing himself off to her. And with this one little gesture, he reassured her all was well.

And it would be.

CHAPTER 23

*I*f Kate ever had thoughts one might perish from too much happiness, she'd been proven wrong. Every day, new delights were arranged for her. And she had Imogen to urge her to new heights of decadence.

But her greatest corruptor was none other than her husband. Jewelers came to the house, plying her with gems and gold till she shone like a chandelier. She and Imogen sat about the salon, like sultans, being waited upon hand and foot as Madame Sophie brought forth her finest materials for them to select for new gowns.

It was a never ending parade of presents. Whenever she started to pull back, Ryder would somehow mysteriously appear with a fresh bottle of champagne, a host of servants behind him with trays of the most delicious foods and a coaxing smile, accompanied by the words that no one was going to call him a neglectful husband.

It was frightfully endearing the way he peppered her with gifts. Shoes and fans, gloves and hats, all arrived for her selection.

Kate and Imogen took it all in stride, clapping her hands and comparing green silk against pink silk. They put lace and silver braiding up to their faces trying to decide which suited best, and then choosing to take both.

But most overwhelming of all, Ryder wouldn't let her pay a penny. She tried, lord knew she had, but at the mere mention of it, he lifted a black brow and silenced her on the subject.

He bought her books and furniture from France. The rarest orchids filled her room every day. And when she wasn't attending a party with her husband or receiving his gifts, she was in bed with him. She barely ever slept. Life had become an endless whirl of pleasure. They chattered like two children who finally found friends. Each morning they dined together, discussed the paper together. He rode and insisted she ride in the carriage as they went out to the park.

It was as if both of them had been starved for human company and affection and finally they'd been admitted to the banquet of happiness.

Kate didn't quite know what to make of it. All she knew was she was happier than she'd ever been. And her heart, traitorous little thing it was, was slowly softening. Every time Ryder came into a room, she couldn't stop her gaze from turning to him, just as he looked to her.

When he was gone, she longed for him. When they were together she was completely content.

In short, it was terrifying.

She'd promised herself she would never let herself grow weak under a man's attentions again. But he was positively relentless.

Each little action he took was designed to make her happier, more comfortable. If she preferred fish to meat, they had fish five out of seven days. If she liked strawberries, a dozen dishes were prepared with the fruit. If she voiced she liked Marlowe, every one of his works would arrive in a crate with her name on it.

Who was ever given such care?

With each day, Kate felt safer, more secure and firmly believed she'd been deemed the luckiest woman in the world. And any day he would tell her more about himself. He would discuss the things that hurt him, just as she told him about Percy.

But the days stretched by and the end of the season neared. Though they talked endlessly, he never mentioned his past or anything that might trouble him. And each day he relegated her to the edges of his life, she grew more and more determined to find a way to be closer to him.

Then as June began to close, the presents continued, but his presence began to fade. Every day, he spent a little less time with her. He smiled less, and he shifted uncomfortably in his chair. The carefree happiness that had begun to brighten his dark face, disappeared. Instead, she saw the duke she first met. The one who roared at his butler through his door.

And Kate felt panic. For the first time in her life, she knew real and true panic.

Today was a perfect example. He sat across from her at the breakfast table, his fork perched in his hand, but no food was upon it. He stared at the porcelain plate as if he might bore a hole through it, and his food remained cold and untouched.

Kate couldn't bring herself to eat. When she tried a bite of eggs, they turned to glue in her mouth, and she had to use all her effort to chew and swallow.

This Ryder sat silent in his black clothes and wore that blasted pale ribbon she couldn't quite bring herself to ask about. She was a coward for not speaking of the little slip of fabric. But she was afraid that if she did, he might regress altogether. And he said nothing. This was not the man she had spent the last month with, and she had no idea what to say to him. Still, she had to try. She could not lose the friend who had come to be so dear to her. She could not. She could not go back to that loneliness.

"Shall we go for a ride today?" she ventured, hating herself for the slight brittle cheer in her voice.

He didn't answer.

"Ryder?"

He looked up suddenly, his black eyes empty and flat. "Pardon?"

She swallowed, her stomach rolling. "A ride?"

He looked to the window for a moment, contemplating the sun and then he looked at the door as if it offered freedom. "No. No, thank you. You should go." Pushing back his chair, he strode to her and absently pressed a kiss to the top of her head. "Enjoy the day."

As he silently left the room, Kate murmured to herself, "But where are you going?"

Sitting in silence, the tick of the clock upon the sideboard grated on her nerves. She gripped the edge of the table and ground her teeth down. She would not cry. Crying fixed nothing. Crying was for fools.

Even so, her throat began to tighten. She forced herself to take a shuddering breath. She didn't even need to ask where he'd gone. She already knew. Like every day, he went up to his room and shut the door.

And let no one, absolutely no one, inside.

It was like a metaphor for his life.

Well, she wasn't going to have it. She wasn't about to let her dearest friend descend into such darkness. But first she had to find out why he changed with such suddenness.

Kate shoved back from the chair and strode out into the halls. Determination marked her every step as she went in search of their butler. She could have just rang, but frustration was humming through her to the point she thought she might scream.

And screaming, like crying, wouldn't solve a blasted thing. She already let Ryder's actions pass too long without seeking answers.

She went through hall after hall, her slippared shoes padding along the parquet and carpeted floors. At last she came to the downstairs and wound her way through the plain servant halls.

“Grieves!” she called.

A few of the maids stopped like frightened rabbits as they spotted her. Belatedly, they dropped into curtsies.

“Have you seen Grieves?” she demanded.

The girls pointed down the hall. Kate nodded and charged off. There were several doors with tall windows, and she squinted through each, trying to spot the butler.

Why in the devil did she have to live in such large house?

At last, she came to a door with an especially polished brass knob and spotted the white haired old man bent over a ledger through the sparkingly clear window. Without knocking, she pushed the door open.

The old man’s head snapped up and his mouth opened and closed like a flopping fish upon the bank. “Your—Your Grace.” He started to stand, the movement slow and laborious for his aging joints.

“No, Grieves, please don’t rise.” She folded her hands together, unsure of how to start. She glanced at the plain, straight backed chair before his desk. “May I sit?”

Grieves’ shaggy brows drew together in consternation. He eyed the chair then her, then the chair again. Clearly, a duchess had never asked to sit on the other side of a desk in his presence. “Of course, Your Grace.”

She hurried into his office and plunked herself down without ado, her skirts rustling. “You’ve known the duke for some time.” It was a statement and not a question.

Grieves closed the large, leather bound ledger and stroked the cover slowly. “I have indeed.”

Lord, she wished she could just come out with it, but even she had to admit a degree of tact was needed. “Then you have recognized his recent behavior?”

Immediately, Grieves’ face shuttered. He placed the ledger aside and clasped his hands before him on the desk. “I don’t know what you mean, I’m sure, Your Grace.”

Kate blew out a breath and inched her chair forward. “I don’t have time for this, Grieves. It pains me greatly to see your master in this condition.” How could she convince the old man of her intentions, and even worse, could she discuss the state of the duke? “Please, I wish to help him.”

Grieves' old face smoothed a bit and sympathy filled his eyes. Quickly, he looked to the windows as if fearing Ryder might march down and catch him. "Oh madam, I wish you could help him, and I thought you had. He's been so happy these many weeks." The butler inclined his white head. "All due to you."

"Thank you," Kate said quickly, wishing to get straight to the matter. "But now?"

Grieves let out a great sigh, rather like a bellow's pump as he leaned back. "He's been like this for years now, Your Grace. Ever since. . ." The butler caught himself and glanced at the door.

"Yes?" she urged. It was so odd, feeling like a conspirator in her husband's house. But that was exactly what she was. A conspirator for his happiness. And yet, it felt a little wrong sitting here, asking for his most personal information.

Grieves stood and quickly closed the door. He turned back towards her, his face creased with age and sadness. "Ever since his first duchess, Lady Jane, passed away."

Kate's mouth dried. He'd been married. She'd known it. Mrs. Barton had even intimated his devoted nature to the lady's memory. But he never once let her believe he'd been passionately in love with the lady. In fact, he never once said her name. "He's been shutting himself away for that long?"

Grieves nodded. "Sometimes for a day, sometimes a month at a time."

Kate looked down at her hands and whispered, "Good Lord." Her dark knight was dark indeed. But he had such life in him to waste it in this manner.

"I shouldn't speak of it," the butler said, his voice a hoarse whisper.

Kate turned pleading eyes up to him. "Please, I know so little." It hurt so to confess it, but she needed to help Ryder. "He tells me nothing."

After a moment, Grieves nodded, his mouth pursing around no doubt painful words. "I've known him all his life. 'Tis why he trusts me." Shaking his head, Grieves gave her his back. "Oh, madam, I shouldn't."

"If you care about His Grace, you should. I cannot bear to see him thus."

"You shall have to. For it is always worse this time of year."

At last, Kate couldn't bear to sit any longer. The energy which had driven her to seek this man out drove her to stand. "But why?"

Grieves shrugged and crossed back to his desk. "'Tis the end of the Season."

"What does that have anything to do with—"

"Pardon, Your Grace, but Lady Jane, poor sweet soul, died in July. Of smallpox. She'd caught it nursing His Grace's tenants."

“Oh.” The sound escaped Kate’s lips, her chest squeezing with a ridiculous jealousy and sorrow at Ryder’s pain.

“The duke, well, he’d been on his own, both his parents dying when he was young.” Grieves’ hands twisted together, a sign of his unease at their discussion. “And the former duchess, she was so kind to him, helping him recover grieving for them.”

The sadness of it sucked the energy out of her, and she found herself holding onto the high back of the chair. Was he still in love with her? Mrs. Barton claimed his heart still belonged to her.

Kate pressed her lips together. She’d always known she could not give her love to him. And this was exactly why. In all possibility, he would never love her. Ryder had known so much pain. “But why does he do this to himself?”

The butler looked at her for a moment, then began coughing. His skin turned red, and he lowered himself into his chair. Sucking in a breath, his gnarled fingers curled into fists. “God, the memory of it, Your Grace. I still remember the day of her death. The duke came storming out of Lady Jane’s room. He didn’t say a word, not one. But not a picture nor a book was left undamaged in his study such was his grief.”

“What?” Kate demanded. He never mentioned his wife’s death or really any of his life before they’d met. But like so many things she’d blithely ignored in marrying Ryder, she was becoming fully aware.

“I beg your pardon, Your Grace, but I’m betraying confidences. I cannot tell you more.”

“I understand.” Though she longed to ask more questions regarding his father’s death, they should be questions for her husband. Questions he most likely did not wish her to ask. “Is there no way to bring him out of this?”

“Not that I’ve seen. It used to be right brutal the first two years after her death. Now, we just wait and see. But I’m sure it won’t be so bad, what with you here. He cares about your happiness. He comes out of his room in the mornings.”

And she was supposed to find that heartening? “How long will it last?”

“Oh, at this time of year?” Grieves smiled, attempting cheer. “The worst of it is over by the fall.”

“The fall?” Her voice grew tight, and she could barely get the words out. Almost three months. Three months of Ryder in pain. No, she wouldn’t allow it. There had to be something to be done.

And she would find it. Life was too short for him to waste it in such self-recrimination. The Ryder she knew would never harm anyone. No, he would lay down his heart, his soul, his body to help them.

She wouldn't let them go on in silent pain like this. No, it was time for him to share his past. With her.

CHAPTER 24

Kathryn, as so many invariably did, was staring at him as if he'd gone mad. Totally insane, in fact. Oh, she was trying to hide it as she glanced at him through half closed eyes in the mirror, brushing her beautiful hair in long even strokes.

The evening and the golden candlelight turned her pale face luminous. The folds of her dark blue dressing gown spilled about her legs and the lace at her neck parted to reveal the curve of her breasts. Like this, no one was more beautiful than his Kathryn.

Swirling the cognac in his crystal glass, he shifted positions on his cushioned, chocolate leather chair before the fire. It might be better if she didn't notice he had observed her concerned glances.

But what the hell could he do? Oh, he knew she was distressed. He'd have to be a moron not to notice the tension in her shoulders, and the way she pursed her lips before speaking to him as if he might suddenly turn into a raging mad man. And he should try harder to assure her, to pull himself out of his growing hell. But. . .

Ryder snapped his gaze to the fire, letting the brightness of it burn his eyes, burn them until they stung.

He'd done the unthinkable.

He let Jane's birthday pass without notice.

Even now the thought made him want to vomit.

Discreetly, he fingered the worn ribbon circling his wrist. How could he have done such a thing? How could he have let that day slip by when year after year he lit candles and donated funds to her favorite charities? He usually spent the day in quiet solitude, reading John Donne, her favorite poet. *Death thou shalt die.* . .

But death had not died, not before it had stolen Jane.

Ryder bit down on the inside of his cheek trying to fight back his self revulsion. This year he and Kathryn had gone to a ball on Jane's birthday. On the anniversary of her birthday, he had drank and caroused with his friends, and then he had taken Kate home and made passionate love to her.

It hadn't even occurred to him till a week later what he'd done.

At the outset of his new marriage he promised himself he could make Kathryn happy and still devote himself to Jane's memory. And he'd failed her. He was failing them both.

The pain and guilt of knowing that rolled in darker than any thunderstorm, and since, nothing could make him forget what a deplorable bastard he was.

Even so, he snuck a glance at Kathryn as she rubbed scented lotion over her slender hands. She was worried about him, but that would pass. She would grow accustomed to his ways and lord knew he struggled to keep the real darkness at bay for her sake.

Before he would have locked himself in. Kept to himself until he could meet people again without wanting to kill them all for having the kind of happiness that had been torn from him.

He took a long fast swallow, trying to convince himself his world was not about to implode.

Kathryn turned in her chair, the silk of her gown caressing her long legs. "What are you thinking, good sir?"

"Hmm?" Ryder rubbed the back of his hand over his lips, trying to hide the list of self recriminations from his face.

"You look like Atlas." She stood, the folds of her gown whooshing into place. A smile tilted her lips as she gracefully closed the distance between them. "Has the weight of the world been placed upon your shoulders?" There was a false note of cheer to her usually rich voice.

He forced himself to laugh and took her hand. If they could just manage to ignore his pain, all would turn out. She'd be cared for, if not entirely loved, and he. . . He'd find a way to never forget Jane again. "Come."

Easily, he pulled Kathryn down onto his lap. It had been some time since he'd allowed himself this closeness with her and immediately his blood stirred straight to his cock.

Resting her body against him with what seemed like complete trust, she traced her fingers over his jawline. For several seconds she remained silent, her gaze searching his face. "You're not happy?"

The instant desire that had fired his veins faded, and Ryder shifted uncomfortably. This was not where he wanted the conversation to head. If he started answering these kind of questions, she would ask deeper ones. Questions about the past. And there was no way in hell he was going to discuss his pained

thoughts with her. She deserved happiness, and such talk would only distress her further.

If he could distract her with the passion that rose so easily between them, the feeling she was about to tear open a long covered wound would disappear, and he could go on with this masquerade.

Slowly, he lifted the snifter to his lips and took a long drink of cognac, letting it fill his mouth. He didn't swallow. With his free hand, he tilted her head back and bent to kiss her. She arched to his body and moaned in shock as his lips parted ever so slightly, allowing the rich, burning liquid to slide into her mouth. As they kissed, their mouths working together to share the heady taste, he wove his hand into her silken hair.

When they'd finished the cognac, he let the crystal glass clunk to the thick carpet beneath his chair. He didn't let the kiss break. He wanted her wild for him and completely without thought. Yet, he could not stop thinking. Thinking of the woman who ruled his past, and the woman who was now in his arms.

Even as desire and hunger filled him, anger at his own lack of control raced through his veins. Ryder tried to force the thought away, focusing on the soft feel of Kate.

Their tongues tangled and sucked gently, the wet heat a blissful reminder of the wet heat they would share later.

Ryder parted her legs and cupped her mound through her dressing gown. She jerked up towards him. Desire surged through his groin and hardened his cock. Her hands clasped at his arms, holding on tightly. God, how had he denied himself this? How had he let himself separate from this woman? Her body was the most beautiful and comforting thing he'd ever known. Easily, he tugged her skirts up and stroked his hand up her thigh, curving his fingers around her hip. She lay against him, her body softening and opening to him.

He loved it. It was bloody amazing and horrifying the kind of trust she instilled in him. In truth, Kathryn held so little back and the weight of it, terrified him. For he had hidden so much about himself for so long.

Ever so slightly, he traced his fingers over the soft curls at the apex of her thighs.

She moaned and opened her thighs further to his touch. At her movement, he dipped his fingertips into her wet pussy. Sighing at the feel of her welcome heat, Ryder swirled his fingers over her nub.

She reached for his arm and did something she had never done before, her fingers twisted into the ribbon at his wrist.

Ryder tensed against her and pulled back instantly. "Don't."



Kathryn stilled, suddenly sure she might vomit. She leaned back away from him, her skin chilling under his touch. All this time, she had chosen to ignore the reason he would never love her because of course, she had promised herself she would never love again. But lord how she had lied to herself. And as the room pulsed around her, sucking the air from her lungs, she realized that once again she played the fool.

He was desperately in love with another woman. A woman who had been dead for years. "It's hers," she whispered. "Isn't it?"

Ryder looked away, his hand frozen against her thigh. "We will not discuss it."

"Is that what you want? To not talk about it?"

He drew in a slow breath. "Frankly? Yes."

"I see," she said, her voice panicky to her own ears. "Can you not tell me anything?" She gripped his arms gently but firmly as if he might suddenly disappear from her. "Anything?"

"Kathryn. Not now."

"No." She let out a harsh breath. "You know so much about me, I have told you everything. Yet, you will tell me nothing."

She pushed against his chest gently so she might sit upright. It hurt the way he could make her feel so cared for and then keep her out of every part of his life that was of any importance. "I thought we were at least friends, Ryder. I never expected anything else but. . ." Her throat worked as if the words were too painful to speak.

Ryder looked away his jaw tightening. "I don't want to talk about her."

Abruptly, it hit her. And never in her life had she felt more alone.

"No. You don't wish to talk about her with *me*." Kate swallowed against her twisting insides. Could she never learn? She'd been such a fool. Such a fool. Again. "Because you're betraying her with *me*."

Quickly, Ryder pushed Kathryn up and stood, turning his back to her. "What do you wish me to say?" His hands came up wildly, and he crossed them firmly across his chest. "That you are indeed right?"

Kathryn stared at the black expanse of his back desperately wanting to wrap her arms around him. She could feel him slipping further away from her, even

further than he had in the last days. And if he was still so in love with his first wife, she'd never be able to pull him back.

"Ryder, she's gone. You should—"

He whipped around so fast, Kate stumbled back. Fire burned in his eyes, and his chest pumped up and down in harsh breaths. "I don't need you to tell me she's gone. I think on it every damn day."

Lord, she hated it, but fear, fear she was going to push him too far burrowed deep inside her heart. But he needed to hear the truth, needed to break free of the darkness. "Yes and you should always hold her in your heart, but—"

"*But what?* What do you want to hear?" He took a step forward. "That she gave me the love I so longed for after my parent's death?"

Kate throat tightened as she backed away from his sudden fury. "I just want you to be happy—"

"Happy?" he barked. "I deserve to die in Hell for not taking better care of her."

Kate shook her head, a tear slipping down her cheek. "That is not true. You are a good man. You—"

"I promised her when she lay dying that I would always love her, that I would never forget her—" His voice cracked. "And I did." Now it dimmed to a bare whisper. "I've been forgetting her."

Oh Lord, her chest burned with pain for him. He was so noble, but he'd drowned himself in agony for so long. And he was shoving her away. Her dearest friend in the world, and he was pushing her out of his life. "Ryder, she'd want you to be happy."

A muscle in his jaw ticked. He hesitated for the briefest moment as if contemplating sharing his pain. But he strode away from her, heading for the door. "I have no intention of discussing this with you."

Kate ran after him, determined not to let him go. He'd become so important to her, she couldn't just let him walk away. Fiercely, she grabbed his arm. "Ryder, I'm your friend. I want to—"

"Jane," he breathed. "Don't."

Jane?

The room swung around, and Kate had to blink against the roar of silence stretching between them.

Her grip loosened on his arm, and her mouth turned to sand. Tears stung her eyes and for a moment, she was sure she'd never be able to speak again. "That is not my name," she whispered.

Ryder closed his eyes for a moment. "Oh, God. Forgive me."

Kate dropped her hand and nodded. "This is the dilemma, is it not?" Her face crumpled, but she willed herself not to cry. Crying would solve nothing. Instead, she balled her hands into fists. "I will never be Jane. No one ever will."

"Stop," he snapped, his voice so low it would have terrified the most battle-hardened man. "You are not one to accuse others of barring their hearts. You have made it clear yourself you will never love."

His words echoed around her, and her mouth filled with bitterness. She had worked so hard to protect her heart and now it lay open and cut to ribbons. There was nothing left for her to lose.

She couldn't let her own fear drive them apart. Nor could she let him do this. Not to her. Not to them.

"You are right. But." After sucking in a harsh breath, she proclaimed, "I love you. Even if it makes me the greatest of fools, I love you."

That god awful silence hung between them again, and when he didn't say the only words she could hope to hear in response to her confession, she continued, her voice raspy with unshed tears, "But you would rather spend the rest of your life with a dead woman than with one who loves you here and now." The words slipped out of her mouth before she could stop them.

"Yes." He nodded. "You too are right." He looked down at her, his face a mask of pain and fury.

Kate stared up at him, her throat so tight it stung. For the second time, she had proclaimed her love and been left with nothing. Lord, why did she love those who could or would never love her in turn?

Digging her nails into her palms, she lifted her chin and hardened herself. She'd already laid herself bare. And he had made himself clear. "I understand," she said firmly.

Ryder stared straight ahead, his back ramrod straight. "I don't think you do."

Kate lifted her hand and smiled despite the salty tears slipping down her cheeks. "No. I do. You would rather live with her memory than love me."

Letting her hand drop, she started for the door—the door they had so happily come through on their wedding day. "I cannot stay."

She paused, praying that any moment he would gather her in his arms and beg her to remain. But he did not. She glanced back over her shoulder.

He stood silent, his black eyes pitch in the candlelight.

She shrugged, her gesture tired and extremely distant. "Farewell, Ryder."

And without waiting to see if there was remorse upon his face, she walked out into the dark hall, leaving the greatest happiness she had ever known—and her heart—behind her.

CHAPTER 25

“You cannot go, Your Grace!”

Kate stood shivering in the cold, foggy dead of night dressed in a warm gown of purple velvet and silver. Ryder had bought it for her, something she was trying not to think about. “I must.”

“No,” Grieves said, his voice gruffer than usual, his face barely visible from the coach lamps. “As impertinent as it is for an old goat such as myself to say, you should stay and talk to him, you should. For you love him, madam.”

Unable to stop herself, Kate glanced up to the glass windows and wondered for one heartbreaking moment if Ryder might come storming out of the house to stop her. But he wouldn’t. She knew that. He was still living in his pain. He would always live in his pain.

She forced a brittle smile to her lips as tears stung her eyes. “I must. I cannot —” Her voice broke. “You’re right, Grieves, I do love him. And because I love him, I must go. I cannot stand by and support the way he brutalizes himself.” She folded her hands before her, digging her nails into the backs of her hands, to strengthen her resolve. “Besides if I stay, he will only hate himself more. I know it.”

Grieves’ shaggy brows rose in consternation, a strange sheen lightening his myopic eyes. “He’ll hate himself even more for letting you go.”

“Please Grieves, don’t make this difficult for me.” She looked up at the cloudy sky. “We must accept the way things are.”

Resignation etched itself into his kind old face. “I don’t wish to, but I understand, Your Grace.” Gently, he took her hand in his wizened one and guided her to the coach. “I will miss the happiness you’ve brought to this house. But most of all, I will miss you.”

Kate couldn’t bring herself to look one last time at the home that had been so full of wonder. If she did, she was afraid she’d break into a thousand pieces. So, instead, she flouted propriety and impulsively embraced the old man who shared his kindness so freely. “Thank you. And I you.”

Grieves’ eyes widened with shock. After a moment, he cleared his throat. “Will you at least say goodbye to him?”

God, how she ached to see him, especially knowing now she could not. “We have already said all that needs to be said.”

Grieves nodded, his old face creasing with sadness.

And this time, without looking back, Kate climbed into her coach and leaned into the blue velvet seat. As the whip cracked and the wheels clattered over the cobblestone of the drive, she closed her eyes.

She’d been alone for so many years of her life, and she knew how to be alone. But now, the very idea of living without Ryder was suffocating her. Still, she could not give in.

So, Kathryn pulled the curtains closed and shut herself into darkness, praying for sleep. Praying she would be able to forget.



Two weeks later

The door flung open and Hunt sighed so loud it echoed across the room. “You’ve gone and cocked it up, haven’t you?”

Ryder cradled the bottle against his chest like a man clinging to a piece of wood at sea and grimaced as someone whipped open the curtains. Sunlight spilled into the room falling on him like poison what with his headache.

“Go—” he smacked against the dryness of his mouth. “To the devil.”

“I’ve already made his acquaintance, thank you. Now get your arse off the floor.”

Ryder sprawled before the cold fire and forced himself onto one elbow. “Care for a drink?” he asked, waving the crystal bottle, its contents sloshing about.

Hunt snatched the crystal from him and poured the liquid into the wash basin in the corner of the room. “I think you’ve had enough for an entire army.”

Ryder shook his head, though the movement sent nails spiking through his skull. “I can. . . still think. Means I haven’t had enough.”

Hunt turned on him, strode forward and planted his feet right in front of Ryder’s face. “Bullocks.”

“Humph.” Ryder rolled onto his side, ignoring his depressingly well-dressed friend. His own clothes had a bit of a smell to them, but he wasn’t going to acknowledge the fact he’d slept in them and lived in them for well over a day. Or two. Possibly three. He was no longer certain.

Hunt had no right to judge how he dealt with the horrifically cruel hand fate had handed him. Even if fate dealt Hunt a damned bad hand as well.

“Are you really going to entomb yourself down here?”

Ryder wrapped his arms around himself and closed his eyes tightly as if that might make the damned duke disappear. “Yes.”

Hunt toed him with his boot. “Then you don’t care what your wife’s up to?”

Letting out a harsh breath, he reached out and smacked Hunt’s foot. “I don’t wish to speak about her.”

“Indeed?” A decidedly gossipy tone pitched Hunt’s voice.

“Indeed,” he drawled. Ryder laid still for several seconds, Kathryn’s face, an ever haunting dream, taunted him. He kept trying to remember the smiling cheeky Kathryn, but all he could see was her tear stained face as he had utterly let her down. At last, he opened his eyes to the austere and dusty light. He rolled onto his back and looked at the disapproving gaze of his friend. “How is she?”

Hunt shrugged, eyeing his emerald ring. “I thought you didn’t care.”

“Sod off.” Ryder forced himself to a seated position, and the world spun at a ridiculous speed. Quickly, he braced his head in his hands. “Tell me. It’s a dying man’s last request.”

Hunt snorted. “Still wallowing in drama I see.” Crouching to Ryder’s eye level, he braced an arm on one knee. “Oh, she’s the center of society. Everyone loves your wife.” Smiling like a contented bastard, he added, “And when I say everyone, I actually mean *every gentleman within a hundred feet of her.*”

“I’ll call them all out.” Ryder got onto his hands and knees. “I will.”

“That would be a rather long day of duels, old man. And since you seem to be having trouble standing, I’d say your odds at victory are rather slim.”

Ryder stared down at the intricate carpet wondering how long it would take him to find his bearings and his pistols *and* swords. “Hmmp.”

Perhaps it might be simpler to buy a cannon.

Hunt pointed an accusatory finger. “You have turned misery into an art form, have you not?”

Ryder climbed to his feet, staggered, then turned to Hunt. “And?”

Hunt looked him up and down, disgust furrowing his brow. “And why the hell shouldn’t you find some cheer?”

“You don’t. Why should I?” Still, Ryder swallowed as he recalled the pain-stricken look on Kate’s face as he called her Jane. As he had cruelly ignored that she said she loved him. When he knew how difficult it was for her to say it. Especially when it had become ridiculously clear he loved her. He loved her so

much he'd begun to let himself let Jane go. And now, he couldn't function. At all.

Hunt's face pressed into a stony glower. "I'll ignore that comment given your state. Now go and find her."

"She doesn't want to see me."

"Ah."

Ryder swayed, narrowing his eyes. "Ah, what?"

"Well, the real question here is *why* she doesn't want to see you."

"I know why."

"You're an ass," Hunt said matter-of-factly.

Ryder blew out another breath and gave a small bow. "I am, as you say, an ass."

"Glad to see we're in agreement."

Ryder closed his eyes wishing he could just shove the problem and Hunt out the door. But the last days had been worse than any he'd ever known. He tried to drown her out with drink. But he couldn't. Kathryn had taken root in his heart, and there was no way he could ever remove her.

And God, the things he had said. She would never forgive him. Rightly.

Hunt folded his arms across his chest and stared down at his shining black boots. "You know, I've been your friend for a very long time."

Ryder eyed Hunt wondering what kind of inspiring speech the man had up his sleeve this time. The mere thought was enough to send him back down to the floor in search of a seat. After the last days, he was ridiculously tired and Hunt wasn't helping. One of his rallying talks might finish him.

Hunt finally looked up, his mouth a grim line. "I've put up with your self-inflicted hate fest for a very long time because you are my dearest friend. We've shared much. The death of parents—"

"I don't need any sentimental—"

Hunt snapped up a hand, his green eyes sharp with intent. "Shut your damn mouth and listen."

Ryder blinked and listened with a new degree of interest. Hunt was hardly ever serious.

"I have to believe you can get over this." A surprising tinge of desperation intensified Hunt's rough voice. "I have to believe you can find happiness."

Ryder slowly stood, wondering where the hell this was coming from. Perhaps Hunt had not overcome his own dark wounds.

"I've waited and stood with you through Hell, always believing that one day you'd pull yourself up out of this grave you've been hiding in."

"It's not a grave," he lied.

Is this how Hunt thought of him? All this time, he'd been watching him wallow in grief with what he now knew was detestable self pity?

Hunt snorted. "It is a grave. You won't say goodbye to the dead so instead you've said goodbye to the living."

The words and the truth of them filled the space between them. For years they'd lived in a tentative truce over all this, but apparently Hunt could no longer keep silent.

"You bastard," Ryder ground out.

"You'd rather live with the ghosts," he continued determinedly, "than with me or with most importantly, Kathryn, a beautiful woman who was silly enough to have loved an idiot like you."

"That's not true. I'd give anything to love her freely." Ryder swallowed. For even as he spoke, he could taste the bitterness of his own dishonesty.

"No, Ryder." Hunt's face softened, but he took a step forward, his eyes pinning Ryder to the spot. "You wouldn't. You've cradled your guilt to your chest like a beloved child and now you don't know how to live without it. And if you don't stop, Kathryn will—"

"Don't," Ryder barked, his eyes stinging.

"Kathryn will live her life without you," he continued mercilessly, his voice sharp as a blade. "You will never have children with her, you will never grow old with her, in short, you will never have her if you cannot let your guilt go." The hard lines of Hunt's face softened and he asked quietly, "Is that what you wish?"

"You're supposed to be my friend." The pain of Hunt's words cut him to the bone, and Ryder couldn't bear it. "Why the hell would you say this?"

"Because I *am* your friend. And for my own sake, I have to believe you can overcome this." Hunt's eyes dimmed as if he was recalling some distant memory. He shook his head. "When you're ready to join the world again, come and find the people who love you."

Ryder stared ahead as Hunt strode from the room and shut the door.

A grave.

He *was* living in a grave of self-recrimination and self-hate. But it was so deep and he'd been in it so long, how would he ever dig himself out?

For Kathryn, he would find a way.



The evening air was cool and the groomed grass beneath his bum was growing damp, but Ryder didn't give a tinker's damn. He'd sat all day with Jane, and he wasn't quite ready to leave. He'd been talking to her for hours. . .

At first, the pain had been unbearable.

Her pale, buttery headstone stared back at him. But there was also something comforting about the place and the words on the stone. Jane had indeed lived, and here was the physical proof of it. She didn't just exist in his mind and his memories. She was here, a part of the earth and the grass beneath him.

Ryder fiddled with the green wine bottle before him. "I—" He drew in a breath and shifted, his heels cutting into the earth. "I've fallen in love with someone, Jane. Someone I don't deserve." The words which should have been so difficult to utter came from him as simply as water flowing from a stream "You would have loved her. I know that sounds strange, but—" Ryder stopped and trailed his fingers through the cool grass. "I need to be with her. I've been meaning to say this all day, but I wasn't sure how." He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to organize his thoughts. "It's time. 'Tis finally time for me to say goodbye."

A tear slipped down his cheek, and instead of dashing it away he let it trickle down and splash onto his black breeches. He was here for a reason. For Kathryn and for himself. "I never came to visit you. Mostly because I couldn't bear the truth. That I couldn't make you come back. But now I know that was a grievous error. So, today, I think it's time we celebrate."

He uncorked the bottle of white wine, Jane's favorite. He cleared his throat. "Here's to you, sweetheart. A beautiful, kind woman whom I will always dearly miss. It was your goodness that took you to God."

Another tear slid down his cheek and he bit down on his lip, forcing himself to continue with the words that so long had needed to be said. "I know you would have hated what I did, and I wish you had been here to knock some sense back into my head."

Ryder lifted the bottle. "Here's to the future. I think perhaps I've kept you from peace by not letting you go. And for that I am truly sorry. Peace to you, Jane. Peace to all of us." Ryder took a drink then slowly, he poured the wine over Jane's grave. When he let a healthy toast pour from the bottle, he re-corked it and smiled. "I'll see you again. But now, I must go and live my life."

He stood, placed the wine bottle in his coat pocket and walked down from the family plot without looking back. It was time to become the sort of husband Kathryn deserved.

CHAPTER 26

*K*ate was going to kill Imogen. It was purely that simple. She was, after all, to blame for her current defensive stance by the immense marble fireplace in the Duke of Portland's Whig ball.

Dancers swept by, skirts billowing and wigs bouncing. The crowd around her pushed and maneuvered. A particularly drunk woman in powder blue had loosened her bodice, lowering it till her nipples showed, and the man with her wove through the people lining the dance floor. They were having a splendid time.

Unlike her.

And every blasted man in the place had at one point or the other asked her to dance. To console her misery, no doubt. As she clasped her champagne glass, she spotted another one.

Pinning what she hoped to be a fiery stare upon her features, she glared at the approaching fop across the Duke of Portland's ballroom. Decked in puce satin and gold embroidery, his purple waistcoat glittered with a veritable diamond mine. And his hair. Well, it resembled quite the cake. And if he wandered within a foot of her, she might swipe it off his head.

But people—no, men—would insist on asking her to dance. Every person in London knew she and the duke were living separately. Apparently, that made her available to the attentions of any ass who thought to give her a try.

At last, he minced forward on his red-heeled shoes. Sadly, her fiery stare did not affect him. He smiled, his lips slightly rouged. "Your Grace, do me the honor?"

Kate lifted her champagne glass and took a long swallow to steady herself. Throughout the night, she'd been composing more and more ludicrous responses to this question. "I'd rather dance about with a monkey on a chain."

The fellow blinked at her for several seconds. "But—But—"

She raised her brows and shook her head at him. "No, thank you. Forgive me. I am in ill humor."

He humphed, causing his wig to twitch upon his head. "Very ill, indeed." And then he was off, wig high.

Kate sighed, glad to be alone again, even if it would only be for moments.

If another fop, dandy, gentleman or lady of any sort asked her to dance she was going to smash her glass of champagne down upon their head. Oh, it was true, she was standing along the ballroom wall, watching the raucous merriment of the dancers which would lead one to believe she was interested in dancing.

In truth, it was by sheer force of will she wasn't rolled up in a quilt eating chocolates rolls, drinking wine and sobbing her eyes out. Not to mention the fact that Imogen made it her personal endeavor to ensure she didn't lock herself up and turn in to moldering dust.

Initially, Kate had been grateful. But at this moment, she was inclined to dunk her friend's head into the exceedingly large, gold nymph-lined crystal punch bowl. When she'd first arrived in London, Kate hadn't realized how many idiots were allowed to walk freely about let alone be invited to parties.

A month ago, she probably would have enjoyed the said idiots. Right now, their sugary happiness and carefree bliss only grated on her like sand on glass.

It was beyond painful, standing amidst the merriment.

And she just should have stayed home, because forcing cheer to her face was about as far from her ability as a woman winning a seat in Parliament. She missed Ryder. Missed him so intensely, she felt hollow inside.

Many times, she almost bolted into her coach and headed back to the house Ryder purchased for them. It had been her happiest home. Luckily, Imogen had always been there to present a sound argument. Still, sound arguments didn't comfort one at night nor uplift one's spirits while sniffing into a pillow.

"You look like the champagne has gone off," Imogen tilted from behind her.

Kate jumped, sloshing the bubbly liquid. "For goodness sake, one mustn't appear out of nowhere. It's rude."

Imogen leaned forward, placed a quick kiss to Kate's cheek then waggled her brows and pressed a hand to her dark green and gold filigree stomacher. "And you wouldn't know anything about rudeness. I saw you send off Baron Caraden. Silly man."

"Ha. Men are the devil."

"I won't argue that, my dear." Imogen placed her hand on Kate's arm. "But I do hate seeing you so out of sorts."

Out of sorts? Kate swallowed at the sudden pain in her throat. She'd thrown her happiness away. Hadn't she? She drew in a slow breath and eyed Imogen with new interest. Her cousin's cheeks were particularly bright. "Why do you look so happy?"

Imogen's smile dimmed a little.

Kate frowned, instantly sorry she sounded so sharp. "Forgive me?"

"Of course you are forgiven." Imogen glanced back over her shoulder towards the entrance into the ball. "And I am only happy because a plan is working just as it should."

Kate rolled her eyes, unable to share in her friend's unabashed enthusiasm in whatever machinations she was up to. "You are going to get in very serious trouble one day."

"Ah, but just think of all the fun I'll have getting into it." Imogen patted at her curls then took a sip of Kate's champagne. Bouncing on her toes in time to the orchestra, she looked out to the crowd of merrymakers. "Now, I won't have you pouting any longer. I want a smile upon your lips. You're going to dance with someone."

"No," Kate said flatly, folding her arms under her breasts in protest. She would not be convinced into anything else which Imogen deemed good for her spirits.

"Why ever not?"

"Because," she said dryly. "I usually end up wanting to skewer whoever I'm dancing with one of my hair pins."

"Hmm." Imogen stopped swaying for a moment. "That would be a rather intriguing end to a dance, but you've caused enough scandal this year."

Kate did not even wish to dignify the comment with a proper response.

Imogen blinked, a slow smile curling her lips as she stared towards the far end of the room. She snatched a glass of champagne from a passing servant. Slipping Kathryn's glass away, she gave her the new one. "Here, you shall need this." Batting her long blonde lashes, she said coyly, "I don't suppose you're willing to dance with anyone? Anyone at all?"

Tears stung her eyes. Quite irritatingly. "There's only one person I want to dance with." She swallowed determined not to cry before the ton. No doubt it would be in Snodgrass' column if she turned into a watering pot in public. "And he's not here."

Imogen pressed in close to her and whispered in her ear, "And if he were?"

Kathryn's breath stopped in her throat and panic immediately throbbed through her veins. "What?!"

"Don't hate me, dearest. But he begged to know where you'd be tonight." Imogen squeezed her arm. "I've seen your unhappiness, and I had to tell him."

She gestured slightly with her chin to the end of the ballroom. “He’s here, by the entrance, looking as gorgeous as ever.”

“Imogen, I swear I am—” The moment she spotted him, her throat squeezed off because her heart jumped up into it.

Ryder Blake, the Duke of Darkwell, the Duke of Death, the man who had stolen and in turn broke her heart stood by the Duke of Hunt in a shocking suit of ivory and silver.

Instead of one of the Devil’s damned he looked like a blasted angel.

The ivory coat clung to his broad shoulders, an extreme contrast to his dark hair. His waistcoat was silver cloth, shot through with gold embroidery. But even more superb, he looked perfectly at ease in it.

Kathryn took a step forward and stumbled on the hem of her gown.

Imogen grabbed her elbow. “Here now, how much have you had to drink?”

“Shh,” she shushed quickly, smoothing down the front of her bodice. “A woman in love should not be expected to move with complete grace.” Kate waved her cousin away, her breath light and her head giddy. “He looks—”

Imogen cocked her head, the massive set of lilies in her hair tilting. “Beautiful. I know.”

“Imogen!”

“Heavenly,” Imogen further supplied, nodding in clear agreement with herself. “Bloody marvelous.”

Oh, yes and yes to all of the above.

Ryder looked transformed. The black that had formed his identity was gone—completely. Everyone, even those who were dancing, stared at him. His usual glower had even seemed to disappear, leaving him with a decidedly boyish though weathered expression.

And she simply could not tear her eyes from him. At last, he turned, the candlelight glinting off his jet black hair, and their eyes met.

The air slipped away and everyone in the room vanished save them.

Kate bit down on her lip, tears stinging her eyes at the sight. It was there in his eyes. A lightness that had never been before. He had not only physically shed the trappings of mourning, but dare she hope he had also done so in his heart?

Kate grabbed hold of Imogen, suddenly determined. Determined that she would never let this man go again. No matter what it took.

A slow smile curved his sensual lips, lighting a fire in his gaze. He strode forward cutting through the crowd, his gaze never leaving her face.

Just a few weeks ago, she walked out of his life sure they would never speak amiably again. Here he was crossing a crowded room towards her, absolute certainty on his strong face.

“What do I do?” Kate demanded, her mind a sudden blank.

“What else do you do with a man like that?” Imogen shrugged. “Drag him into the hallway and have your way with him.”

“That isn’t helpful,” Kate hissed, still unable to take her eyes of his approaching, muscular form.

“Hear what he has to say then. Then have your way with him.”

Kate swallowed, for a moment unsure. Unsure that they could ever find the friendship they had lost. “What if—”

“Kate,” Imogen said quietly. “He’s here for you, you know. Look at him. This change, ’tis for you.” She squeezed Kate’s hand. “He *is* here for you.”

Lord, she hoped Imogen was right, but with Ryder she could never be sure. He was a man of mysterious ways. He had ripped her heart up and done it without even truly intending to hurt her. She knew that. But he’d still done it.

And he might do it again.

“Don’t let him beg forgiveness too easily,” Imogen said. “Make him take you on a trip for his ill behavior. To Italy, I think.”

Kate was tempted to reply she’d never been further from Shropshire than London, let alone the continent, but before she could answer, Ryder stood above her. His broad frame towered over her.

Her hands ached to reach out to him. To touch his face, to hold him in her arms. But it would be foolish to pretend as if nothing happened.

Despite herself, she glanced at his wrist. She couldn’t see if the ribbon was there, his sleeve ever slightly too long.

Wordlessly, he lifted his arm and gently pulled back the ivory fabric, exposing his bare wrist.

Kathryn blinked, her gaze snapping up from his wrist to his face. “I—”

Ryder held out his arm to her. “Would you care to walk with me, Kathryn?”

Kate stared up, hanging on the gentle purr in his voice. Had the beast within truly been tamed? She slowly placed her hand on his arm. The gentle touch sent a shock through her, and even she felt the way his muscles tensed beneath her hand.

Together, they made their way through the crowd.

Kate risked a glance up at Ryder. “Where are we going?”

“It’s a secret,” he replied.

She contemplated him from the corner of her eye. He seemed nervous, yet oddly relaxed. A slight tension played at his shoulders, but his strong face was more peaceful than she could ever recall seeing it.

They walked through the crowd, then into a side hall, then down a barely lit narrow hall. Finally, they came to a tall, white-washed door. Ryder twisted the latch and the balmy night air, full of the smell of hyacinth wafted towards them.

“Come,” Ryder whispered. He took her fingers in his strong grasp and led her out onto the stone path that wound into the small garden.

For her life, she couldn’t understand exactly why she was following him or not demanding they speak of what passed between them. But she couldn’t find the words. Nor at this moment did she care to. Instead, she savored the closeness of him allowing herself to not be bullheaded just this once.

Kate breathed in a deep sigh of relief at the wonderful feel of the cool evening. She tilted her face up to the full moon beaming down on them. The sky was scattered with endless glittering stars. All meant for their wonderment.

Her thin slippers gripped the stones along the path as he led her forward. Fruit trees lined the little lane, and rose bushes were artfully planted beneath them. As they walked in silence, Kate fought back her own nerves. A woman who was less foolish, one who had learned her lessons, would never have come out of the house. She would have stayed firm and protected her heart from further pain. But she’d learned a new lesson in the last weeks.

One could not control their heart, and it was just as foolish to control it as to give it freely.

The path finally led out into a small open area with a stone bench and a sparkling fountain. Trees, their leaves rustling ever so slightly in the breeze, circled the quiet spot.

“You know this place well,” she teased.

Ryder squeezed her hand. “I know a vast many things well. But it is you I wish to know the most.”

Kate’s heart slammed in her chest.

“Kathryn, you have every right to doubt my love for you.”

My love? She knew she should tell herself she was dreaming this. That at any moment she would awake alone in bed, her eyes wet. Lord, he sounded so blissfully beautiful she was certain hyacinth dust was clouding her ears.

He turned to face her, his fingers lacing with hers. “I have treated you most ill.”

She opened her mouth to assure him then stopped. He had treated her ill, but. . . “I never should have allowed it.”

He raised his brows, surprise written across his features. “Allowed, madam?”

“I was afraid of losing what we had, so I didn’t tell you how much you were hurting me or how I saw it hurting you. That was my weakness. I should have out and out told you you were an ass, not sat waiting for the thunderclouds to roll by.”

He blinked several times, then shook his head, lines of remorse pulling at his mouth. “I—”

She lifted a finger to his lips. “No. I promised myself I wouldn’t live in fear when I came to London.” She smiled ruefully. “But I did. I was afraid of caring for you, of angering you, but most of all, of loving you. Hardly the actions of a fearless woman.”

He kissed the pad of her finger then slipped her hand down to rest on his chest. “And yet?”

“And yet, I have realized that no matter what you do, whether you accept my love or return it, my heart will want what it wants. I should never be afraid of that.”

He gazed down on her with what appeared to be wonder. “Oh, Kathryn. I don’t think you have ever truly been afraid. When you desire something you go after it. Fiercely. Beautifully.”

Kathryn had to swallow her heart back at such loving words. So she arched a brow in mock warning. “Nor should I be a mat for you to trod upon with your brusque moods,” she pointed out, not wanting him to forget.

“Never. You will always have only my highest esteem.” He let out a sigh, then brushed a loose curl from her temple. “Kathryn, I am the one who has been afraid. Afraid to let go of the past. Afraid to make myself vulnerable again. And afraid to love you. I know what loss is. I don’t want to feel that way again. And by pushing you away, I lost. I lost the most important thing in my life. The woman I love.” Ryder pulled her to him, caressing his hands down her back. “I love you, Kathryn. I love you.”

Tears sprung to Kathryn’s eyes. “And what has brought this about? Why?”

“You showed me I had chosen to live only a semblance of existence. And you made me want so much more. I won’t live with the past anymore.”

Kate fingered his ivory coat. “You have shed your demons?”

“You slayed them.”

She beamed up at him. “I rather like that idea.”

He smiled back at her, his face full of happiness. “What?”

“That I am *your* knight in shining armor.”

He cupped her chin, his eyes dark with love. “You are the protector of my heart. It is yours to do with as you will.”

“Then I shall take it and keep it safely for you, with my heart where it shall always be loved.”

Lowering his hand, he let out a rushed breath. The tension in his shoulders eased. “You have no idea how sure I was you would send me away.”

“We have both made mistakes.” She reached up and touched the side of his face. “I’m certain we shall make more. We have a lifetime to make them. I know.”

A laugh filled with pure joy bubbled from his throat. “Indeed.” His face grew more serious. “But now. . .”

Kate bit her lip, unsure what he was about to do.

The Duke of Darkwell, one of the most powerful men in the realm, pulled slightly away from her and lowered himself to one *knee*.

Kate gasped. He couldn’t. It was—well, it was—for goodness sake, they were already married! She clasped a hand to her cheek, a smile tugging at her lips. “What are you doing?” she whispered.

“My dearest Kathryn, I am on my knees asking you to be my wife. Not because of scandal, nor duty, nor fortune but because I love you and because you have given me my happiness again. There is nothing better I should like than to spend the rest of my days in your company, your bed, but most of all in your heart.”

Tears sprung to her eyes, and she could barely breathe she was so overwhelmed. “Oh, Ryder. Yes. I’ll marry you today, tomorrow, forever.”

Ryder jumped to his feet, grabbed her waist and yanked her against him. “Forever, darling. We have forever.”

He lowered his mouth to hers, kissing her ever so slowly as if they had all the time in the world.

And to Kate’s delight, she realized they did. They absolutely did.

THE END

DREAMING OF THE DUKE

A DUKES' CLUB NOVEL

By
Eva Devon

BARD PRODUCTIONS

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the work of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

Dreaming of the Duke

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For my son.

Every day is better than the last

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CHAPTER I

London

The Season

Eleven o'clock in the evening

'Tis a generally accepted fact that a wife will spy upon her husband. Whether it be in the harried sifting through of delicately written correspondence, the desperate sniffing of a linen shirt, or the outright following of a husband to his lover's nest to discover his fidelity or lack thereof, wives will inevitably engage in conjugal espionage.

Cordelia Eversleigh, Duchess of Hunt, had reached that inevitability.

But after two days spent in London trotting about cobbled streets, peering through polished glass windows, and attempting to gain entrance to both his home and his club, Cordelia, Cordy, to almost anyone who knew her, had finally admitted that there was only one way she was actually going to engage in conversation with her elusive husband.

She was bloody well going to accost him on the street.

After all, the indignity of being shunted from his front door (also, in all technicality, *her* front door) had been the last straw on the proverbial camel's back. She had enough with following him about. It was time for action.

Besides, her concern in spying was not to discover amorous adventures. In fact, it was quite the opposite. Her interest lay in how to best address the proposition of an annulment. . . from the husband she had never met.

She could hardly remember that day in Rome (a brief trip out of Africa to collect materials and supplies for her parents' archaeological sites) where she had been married by proxy to her husband as a child. Something which, thank goodness, had been actually quite illegal.

However, she could still hear her father's voice intoning, *I have won you a husband Cordy*, before the highly unexpected ceremony. And not just any husband, but the son of a duke. A second son at the time, but still quite a coup. Now, the second son, in a chance of fate, was the Duke of Hunt. And he was a husband who apparently had no more desire than she to be wagered as a child in

a game of chance. His desire or lack thereof made evident by his long-standing absence.

Since reaching her majority a few years ago, her husband's failure to collect her from Luxor or Cairo or anywhere in between, depending upon the time of year and the archaeological season, was significant enough reason to take the incredibly long passage, composed of surly animals, riotous boats, unstable French men determined that Napoleon really should rule all of Europe, and badly-sprung carriages, back to England and demand to know if her husband actually was ever going to bother claiming his wife.

If not. . . Well, an annulment would be the best for both of them. Their marriage wasn't factually valid if challenged in any case, but she wished to leave nothing to chance.

A formal annulment would leave him free to marry someone he truly wished to be married to. And most importantly, she could retrace her steps to France, war torn or no, and speak with the foremost archaeologists of the day. She'd finally be able to study fortified by the knowledge that her lord and master could not swoop down upon her at any legally justified moment, fulfilling a marriage based upon the honorable word of both their fathers.

So, without allowing herself to think twice, she set her determined chin and waited for the doors of Parliament to open and expel the lords of the land as they emerged from their most recent vote.

As if on the command of her thoughts, the towering doors swung and men in multi-hued coats, some bewigged, poured out to the wide street before Westminster Cathedral.

Cordy tightened her fingers about her serviceable parasol, straining to see her duke. She'd brought the parasol, as she always did, for her personal protection and the consideration that one never knew what a man might do at a surprise as large as, say, a reminder of one's matrimonial state.

Arching a brow at the ever emerging group of lords (surely it had taken her less time to reach London than it was taking for the Duke of Hunt to exit), she assessed the girding of her loins. She'd already made certain that they were in as steely a state as possible for potential humiliation and felt a slight weakness of knees (circumstances she was completely alien to).

The stories of her husband's beauty were as frequent and as enraptured as his exploits. His reputation for ending marriages was quite ironic given that he'd never even taken the time to begin or even end his own.

The rather alarming image she had created on the journey to London suddenly danced in her head. Her husband would no doubt be an absolute picture of perfection. All this perfection would only serve to remind her of her lack of suitability for such a buffoon. (Surely all London rakes were buffoons, her husband the buffooniest of them all.) Why else would she be left to rot in such resounding silence for so long?

The only conclusion she could draw was that sun-ravished women with worn fingers and a practical approach to negotiations with grave robbers and idiot Italians were not characteristics one generally sought in a wife. London would doubtlessly consider her a scandal. Abomination might even be the appropriate word.

The sooner she left the better, but first, she had to see *him*.

At least she'd be able to recognize him. Aside from his reported apparent beauty, she'd managed to stare for a good hour at a portrait of him that hung in one of the most fashionable artist's studios the day before. That hour had not increased her usually indomitable confidence. Clever, vivacious, good fun, were all words she'd heard to describe her. Beautiful? No. And surely such a man only appreciated women who were beautiful.

She shook herself at the ridiculous thought. She didn't care what he thought. She didn't want him. That was the entire point of her ludicrous, but important, endeavor.

Cordelia scowled. Irritated with her own sudden sweep of self-pity, she took several steps across the damp pavement, willing him to exit.

And once again, as if she did indeed have the power to summon someone from Parliament, he stepped out from the arched doorway. The dusky light emphasized the sharpness of his cheekbones and the firm square of his jaw that rather begged someone to take a good punch at it. But it was his eyes, eyes that even from over a hundred paces away spoke of an eagerness to meet such a challenge. There was no humor in them, but rather a dark, sardonic intensity as he contemplated the people milling before him.

Cordelia drew in a slow breath. The portrait hadn't done him justice. He was far more beautiful and well. . . terrifying. He looked as if ready to eat anyone who spoke to him. She shivered. Would it be so horrible? To be eaten up by such a man?

She rather fancied she could meet his dangerous mood and rise to it. Still, she had no true idea of his temper. Only the words of her friend, Kathryn,

Duchess of Darkwell, who spoke of him with a sort of tolerant fondness. Surely, someone that Kathryn admired couldn't be too dangerous?

His broad shoulders expanded as if letting out a great sigh. He peered up to the sky then placed his black hat atop his raven hair that was pulled back in a queue. With a sort of tired resignation, he turned up the collar of his great coat and strode out in the misty London early evening.

She was supposed to immediately follow him. Instead, her own booted feet were stuck to the pavement as she stared at his form heading off in the thick mill of Londoners.

It was that strange half-light when day mixed with night and it was that which gave her pause. For good God, it couldn't be that she'd frozen at the sight of him?

To her dismay, she realized he was getting away. Cordelia cursed under her breath and vaulted after him, choosing a pace that was most unwomanly. Still, she wasn't after him to be a lady, now was she?

As the light dimmed, the torch fires of the buildings along the road flickered to life. Far and few between, they barely penetrated the lowering night and she hurried to catch up. She didn't wish to be alone too long on the thoroughfare. She was perfectly capable after years amongst the most questionable of characters, still she was no fool. The glass windowed fronts of squat, ancient buildings lined the street, the sounds of raucous laughter coming from the taverns.

At last, she spotted his tall form, almost a head higher than those around him, just ahead.

Clutching her parasol tighter, she was about to shout out when he suddenly turned to his right and ducked in through the square door of a public house.

Well, bloody famous.

She stared at the now closed door, the sound of a screeching fiddle and men carousing pouring through the thick oak.

Ladies weren't supposed to enter public houses.

This would not normally have given her pause, but she'd learned in the recent days in London that the English were a strange lot. If a woman stepped out of the confines of her narrow and appropriate world, she was free game to treat with any sort of vulgar parlance or attempt at physical coercion. It had been a most interesting lesson. It was also why she had several rocks in her reticule. Still, if she entered the public house, she'd be inviting the worst sort of advances.

Drawing in a steadying breath, Cordy grabbed the door handle and yanked. She'd come far too far to be deterred now.

The sound of Irish music and the smell of sweat hit her like a brick wall as she strode in.

Instead of the immediate attention she assumed she would receive, the thick crowd of men ignored her, drinking heavily from their cups. A dark-haired bar wench was passing out tankard after tankard. "Right, as many drinks as ye can manage! All on the duke," she hollered in a thick Irish accent.

A resounding cheer met her words.

Cordelia didn't know quite what to make of the duke's gesture.

"To Ireland!" shouted one man.

"Erin Go Bragh!" shouted another.

And soon a rousing tune was being played and the thick crowd was pounding their feet and tankards.

Suddenly, several men entered behind her, jostling her forward.

"Eh, love, move along," one of them said.

Cordelia hustled forward towards the bar, desperately trying to spot the duke, but he was nowhere to be seen.

She clutched her parasol and lifted her chin. She had to find him and, well, she was just going to have to inquire. Heading up to the bar, she mustered her most winning grin, the grin she used to coax donkey boys, river guides, and workers convinced that the tombs of glorified, ancient, Egyptian accountants were cursed. "I'm looking for the Duke of Hunt."

The barkeep, a big hulk of a man with a swipe of fiery hair took one look at her, a quick up and down, then said, "You're not his type of petticoat, lass."

Cordelia pulled back her chin before she could stick it too far forward, a terrible habit she'd never quite been able to break, much to the horror of her archaeologically-inclined Aunt Eglantine. Apparently, even she could pass for a woman of the night in such a place. "Even so, I need to see him."

The barkeep leaned forward. "Look lass. You shouldn't be here. This isn't your sort of establishment. You'll have better luck near the newer parks. Lots of wealthy gents."

Her cheeks flushed. "What?"

"The duke. He likes 'em a bit jollier than you, if you understand."

Oh, he did, did he? "Where is he?"

The barkeep's eyes flickered upward.

"Take me to him."

“I—”

The barkeep shook his head, his lips curling into a devilish grin. “Have you recently escaped from an institution, lass?”

Cordelia hmphed out a noise that was not quite ladylike. The very idea. Did she look like a mad woman? “I simply need to meet with him to discuss a personal matter.”

The barkeep’s eyes narrowed. “Now look here, we like the duke here. He’s a good man, fighting for the Irish and their rights. I don’t want no light skirt making his night any worse.”

A booming, cultured voice echoed down from the narrow stairway near the bar, “More gin, Padraig!”

A long pause followed as the barkeep, Padraig presumably, stared up and, apparently, through the rough wood to the voice of the duke above. As if he could indeed see something through the ceiling, he murmured, “On the other hand, perhaps you’ll do.”

Cordelia crooked her own neck and lifted her gaze to where the Irishman’s was, hoping for some illumination as to what she might do, but the ceiling remained just that, a ceiling. This entire event was becoming more fascinating than that season she’d spent a captive of Sheik Faisal.

She dropped her gaze and cleared her throat. “Well, if I will do. . . Then do lead on.”

He gaped at her.

“I promise I shall make it worth your while,” she added.

He gave her a sharp stare. “Look love, I don’t do any pimping. I’ll take you up, but he’s in a right foul mood.” His shoulders relaxed as he relented. “Have a gin first.”

The barkeep pulled a bottle off the shelf poured out two glasses and nudged one towards her, his eyes hard, daring her.

Feeling a mix of relief that the fellow was no longer trying to get rid of her and apprehension at her imminent meeting with her husband, she raised the glass. “Cheers.”

He lifted his. “Sláinte.”

She tilted it all back in one swallow. It burned, but no worse than the liquor she’d consumed dealing with half of Europe’s troublesome males.

At her ability, the barkeep let out a barrel laugh. “Perhaps I was mistaken lass. Perhaps you truly are just what the duke needs.” He placed his glass down

and slipped out from behind the bar, grabbing a full bottle of gin and plunked it in front of her. “Up the stairs. First door on your right.”

“Y-you’re not coming?”

“What, love? You need me to hold your hand?”

“Certainly not,” she said, taking the bottle in hand. She eyed the narrow stair. There was no turning back now. This was the moment she’d been waiting for half of her life. And she was going to meet it head on.

CHAPTER 2

Jack Eversleigh, Duke of Hunt, propped his booted foot up on the worn settee, tilted his head back and sucked the last drops of gin from the bottle. He hated getting drunk on his own. In general, he was a merry fellow and merry fellows didn't get six sheets to the wind in morose seclusion. Still, the vote today had gone with the Tories. And Ireland was bugged. In fact, Ireland would have to get used to the position of being on all fours, England at the rear because the damned pompous lords, who couldn't see what damage they were doing, had insisted on denying home rule.

And given that this wasn't the first time the vote had gone tits up, he'd opted not to go home with his friend, the Duke of Darkwell, and enjoy a familial supper with the new duchess, but to get absolutely out of his wits. In fact, all his usual friends were unavailable. The Duke of Roth was abroad and the Duke of Aston, an honorary member of The Dukes' Club was in Scotland of all places.

Bloody Hell. The Dukes' Club had been formed years ago so that the few members would have someone of equal rank to commiserate with and not be puffed up with sunshine and flattery. As a duke, even a terribly bad one, people would insist on fawning. And well, the only one who dared to treat a duke as an equal was another duke. It didn't seem fair that tonight when he wished to get completely sauced they were all occupied.

But here he was.

On his own.

Perhaps it had been a bad plan. He'd already downed a half pint of gin in minutes. Ah well, with any luck, in a few moments he wouldn't remember his name let alone the political state of this country. . . or his clear inability to make meaningful change.

A knock, quite unlike Padraig's, penetrated his reverie. He shook his head slightly, not quite foxed, but pleasantly afloat. "You brought the gin?"

"I did indeed."

He furrowed his brow at the sound of the woman's voice.

Good God, it was delicious.

Soft and low and rich like it could wrap him up, soothe his hurts, and then give him a good dose of pleasuring. Even so, he was in no mood for the machinations of a woman tonight. Staring at the wall, he waved a dismissive hand. "Leave the bottle. Your services are not required."

There was a long pause. "I do beg your pardon, but to what services are you referring?"

Her remarkable grammar and accent gave him pause. "You don't sound like a whore."

He cursed silently. The gin was clearly taking its effect.

She snorted. *Snorted*. "Why, thank you, I suppose."

Something inside him lifted ever so slightly out of his self-pitying pool of gin. She couldn't be his usual sort and yet Padraig had let her up. Suddenly, he had to see her. To see the woman who had snorted at his incorrect supposition. Slowly, he turned.

She stood in the doorway, a gin bottle in her hands. From the top of her cloaked blonde head to the hem of her dark blue gown, she looked completely out of place and yet. . . unshaken. So, she was used to shady rooms and the carousing of the male sex. For the first time in quite some time, Jack felt. . . well, he felt confused. Entirely. What was he to make of this woman, lady, creature of the night? Which was she?

"I do beg your pardon, my dear girl, you don't look it but one can never tell these days, could you clarify. . . Are you a prostitute?"

Sparks lit her eyes, firing them to cobalt blue. That soft mouth of hers pressed into a tight, disapproving line. A line that remarkably only added to her strange charm.

"Not a prostitute then," he sallied, righting himself. He let out a sigh. If she wasn't here for a few shillings then why the devil was she here? All he wanted was to get dead drunk.

Oh sod it, what if she was here on some mad-capped venture? Ladies did have a tendency to corner him in dark corners seeking a tryst, a cheery bit of bounce and tickle to alleviate their bleak and unrelentingly proper lives. "Have you come for a tumble, at all? You see, I'm not in the mood for anything too exciting at the moment, but I suppose I could rally if you're desperate," he drawled, hoping to get rid of her. Hoping that she'd turn on her heel and patter back to wherever she'd come from so he could immerse himself back into self-sorrow.

"You, sir," she said tartly, "are outrageous."

He dropped the empty bottle to the floor then tilted his head to the side. She was not behaving as she ought. No fluttering, no batting of lashes, no gushing over how she longed to be taken. Curious.

"I certainly am," he agreed dryly, holding his hand out and gesturing towards the gin bottle. "Now, do something useful and bring me that gin."

She arched a blonde brow. "My, we are arrogant aren't we?"

He laughed. "What? Are we the queen?"

She scowled. "I was referring to you."

"Oh," he said, suddenly enjoying winding her up. "Would you care to list a few other adjectives? If you cannot, I can supply them for you."

"Pompous," she retorted. She propped her free hand on her hip, the very semblance of a young gorgon. "Is that upon your list?"

"Mmm," he purred. "Yes. And bombastic. Oh and unrepentant in my devotion to the happiness of women." The lie tasted like a sickness on his tongue. Happiness was as elusive as his redemption.

Her eyes swept over him again, this time slowly, most likely attempting to sketch his character, but as her gaze lingered over his anatomy, her cheeks colored a delicious rose.

As her eyes flicked over his white linen-covered chest and then up to his face, her full lips pursed with consternation. "I knew you'd be dashing, everyone says so, and arrogant, of course, but I had no idea you'd be so. . ." She paused, clearly searching for the appropriate word and then her consternation turned to a bewildered grin. "So impossibly dramatic. I believe you have read too many romantic poems, sir, and it has left you most affected. Lord Byron's impassioned heroes really are best left on the page."

Jack stared at her for a moment completely uncomprehending the possibility that she could truly be in this room saying such accurate and, simultaneously, amusing things. A laugh boomed from him. The deep wave of sound started in his stomach and poured from his lips. "My God, woman, you are a treasure."

Her bewildered chagrin faded, replaced again by her confounded look of scrupulous analysis. "I am surprised you think so, Your Grace."

"You see, honesty is not a gift I am usually given." He bowed his head slightly. "I thank you."

She eyed him as though he might begin to dance a jig and sing in tongues. "You are most welcome."

"You never answered my question, but given your summary of my person, I take it you have not come for any sort of physical intimacy."

Her nostrils flared and, though a seeming impossibility, her already perfect posture snapped straighter still. “Most certainly not.”

Oh, how he suddenly longed to bend that ramrod-straight back with pleasure. Would she sway under his touch? Christ but her indignation at his supposition absolutely stunned him and he adored it. She was so easy to rile. He tsked. “You haven’t come to reform me have you? My grandmother has tried again and again and failed. Now, if you were to spend an hour laboring upon your knees. . . We might as well enjoy the position.”

Her eyes snapped into two shocked, flashing orbs.

Once again, he found himself surprised. He would have assumed from her easily outraged persona, she would not have understood his innuendo. How interesting.

Allowing an exaggerated, soul-suffering sigh, he continued, “Still, pray though you might, I should not show an inch of difference.”

She hesitated then said, “I don’t pray, generally speaking.”

He blinked. She didn’t pray? “No laborious pining to our Lord?”

“I hardly think that effective and—”

“Drink?” he cut in, suddenly wishing to keep her in his rooms until sun-up and not for his usual reasons. He couldn’t recall the last time he’d been met with such a surprise. How often did he meet a woman who came in dressed fairly like a charity worker, castigated his appearance and attitude, and then declared she did not pray?

Never, that’s when, and he was not about to let the moment pass.

“Yes,” she said a trifle too quickly. Then she smiled, her lips parting into such a transformative gesture that he stopped.

It completely altered her face. In one astonishing moment, the sun had come to England and his very dark, dark room. He felt the power of that smile to his very core and he had to shake himself before he could point out, “You’ve the bottle.”

A stunned laugh escaped her lips. “So I have.” She glanced about. “Cups?”

He gave her a slow smile. “No cups. If you wish a drink you shall have to do it as I do.”

She stared at the bottle of gin for a long moment, shrugged her slender shoulders then pulled the cork and took a swig.

He waited for the horrified look on her face. And waited.

She smiled. “This really isn’t so terrible.”

Jack gaped. She seemed a lady, but her actions. . . Her actions led him back to that strange emotion, confusion.

She frowned. "Now, what was I saying?"

He cleared his throat, feeling completely at sea. "Forgive me for interrupting. You were telling me you do not pray."

"Not really, no." She eyed the bottle again and took another neat drink. "Though there were a variety of diverse faiths about, my parents were far more concerned with their own enterprises. I do occasionally speak to nature though."

He just refrained from turning his gape to a full gawk. "Nature?" he echoed.

"Yes," she declared firmly. "I find rocks to be quite magnificent."

His disorientation increasing, he stared at the bottle in her hand and felt an incredible need for its contents. "Rocks?"

"Not the little ones, mind you," she effused, waving the bottle ever so slightly. "Towering, cavernous rocks. They are very inspiring and. . ." her words trailed off as if she suddenly found herself to be babbling.

The woman worshipped rocks? He wished to urge her to continue in her credo of nature worship, but felt certain she would not be teased out after her sudden self-awareness.

Jack forced himself to his feet. He wanted to meet her halfway, to shrug off his mask of a joker and just have a beautiful conversation with her. After all, the woman was entirely unlike any of the other ladies of his acquaintance. How could he pass this opportunity up? She had no guile or artifice and if he asked her a question, she would give him an honest, unguarded answer. That was an entirely new experience to his palate. For once, he found himself wishing to speak with a woman who, instead of worshipping the ground he walked upon, worshipped rocks.

He lowered his eyes to her left hand. No ring. Which in his experience, of course, meant nothing. Women were just as fickle as men and perhaps more so, because at least men did not give over to protestations of undying fidelity whilst secretly shagging the footman.

She was of an age to be married, at least a few years over, and she didn't seem to be completely comfortable with him. As he lifted his eyes back to her face, he realized it didn't matter if she were married or not, experienced or not, she'd made it clear she wasn't here for an affair. Which, of course, begged the question, why the devil was she here?

Jack ground his teeth together as he avoided looking at her simple dress and plainly styled hair, wondering what exactly to say next. She was so unlike the

powdered and be-laced tarts that came for a guaranteed evening of sin, he had forgotten what to do with her. How did one simply converse with a woman? And there was the small possibility, for all her protestations, she was still hoping he might bed her. Women were odd creatures, produced by a society which only praised unobtainable virgins and devoted wives, frequently forced to protest when they wished to give in.

It made negotiating the waters of seduction most precarious for the unskilled.

For a moment, Jack considered seizing the bottle, then chucking her out of the room. If she were a lady, an innocent, though he didn't believe innocence to be a lasting quality in women or men, she was risking her reputation being here. Hell, she was risking her reputation being in the tavern. He'd have to ensure Padraig put her in a hackney.

But the consideration didn't last as long as it might with an honorable man. Tonight his darkness was pressing him with renewed vigor and, for the first time in a long time, he actually allowed himself to consider indulging in a bit of company to ease the pain.

Jack slowly approached her.

Her gaze traced over his face then over his linen-clad shoulders, muscled from hours of boxing drills and fencing rounds. Her perusal was extremely odd, as though she were making notes of his measurements and proportions.

He couldn't help it, the idea and her regard made him smile. His damn lips curved of their own volition.

In small, calculated degrees, he reached towards her.

She yanked her gaze from his chest, down to his hand.

He waited for her to hand him the bottle and for their fingers to meet.

It was the softest touch. Her gloves, plain black leather, brushed his skin. He allowed the moment to linger. The roughness of his hands brushed against the delicacy of hers. Her breasts lifted in a sharp breath and that single movement sent the blood in his body shooting straight to his groin. He was used to it. Desire, though not usually for seemingly prim misses, was part of his strange and empty existence. But when he met her eyes, his chest tightened with a sensation he hadn't felt in...

Jack fought the urge to jerk back. Not in fear, but because her eyes were full of unveiled curiosity and complete openness. An openness which left her completely bare before him.

To his shock, he heard a part of himself he'd been certain was dead and gone, whisper for him to give in to that youthful naiveté which stared back at him. And

perhaps, perhaps if he kissed her soft, full lips, he might be able to take a bit of her openness into his exhausted soul.

The thought was so ridiculous and jarred him so badly, he asked abruptly, “Are you married?”

She blinked quickly and lowered her chin. “Y-y-yes. I am.”

“Of course you are,” he bit out.

He wanted to throttle himself. A difficult, if appealing, proposition. Just because she seemed to be so entirely different from all the others didn’t mean that, at some fundamental level, she wasn’t the same as all the other married women he’d had experience with. He took a long swallow of the gin, glaring down at her with new eyes. “Are you unhappy in your marriage?”

“At present, I am unable to make a discerning judgment,” she huffed, any semblance of her earlier smile disappearing, replaced by prickling indignation.

“Then why are you here?” he whispered. He allowed his gaze to become half-hooded, masking his disappointment, yet suggesting desire. “Don’t you love your husband? Or your reputation?”

The look had its effect; she lifted her face up towards his, her gaze softening as if confused and taken in at once. She stared at his mouth for a long moment then jerked her gaze away. “No, and that is exactly what I—”

A loud banging on his door cut her off before she could doubtlessly declare her intentions for visiting an unmarried man’s abode, regardless of her married state.

“Jack!” the Duke of Darkwell thundered from the hallway.

“What is it now?” Jack called, his heart suddenly pounding with concern and another emotion. He wasn’t sure if it was relief or disappointment at being given a reprieve from this odd woman’s presence. But if Darkwell was here something was seriously amiss. Otherwise the fellow would be in bed with his duchess.

“Your brother!” Suddenly, the door banged open and Darkwell strode through, his eyes hard with worry beneath uncombed black hair.

“Is he dead?” Jack quipped, unable to be serious. Seriousness was not the way to meet one’s woes. He’d learned that long ago.

Darkwell stopped, spotting the young woman. He frowned. “What the devil are you doing here? I know you wished to see Hunt but—”

She shook her head vehemently.

Darkwell snapped his mouth shut but his gaze was unrelenting in his disapproval.

“You two know each other?” Jack demanded, another unfamiliar emotion making his voice harsher than he intended.

Darkwell gave a terse nod. “She’s a friend of my wife and is our guest.”

“Your guest. . .” He shook his head, the gin making everything a good deal foggier than he liked. “My brother. . . What about him?”

“I went to The Rapier Club and let’s just say Charles is on a rampage. It’s imperative you go to him immediately.”

Jack let out an exhausted sigh. It was tempting to tell Darkwell to go to Hell, but the old boy wouldn’t have disturbed him if it wasn’t important. And since their father’s death just last year, his twin, Charles was on the fast road to Hell and Jack would not let his twin walk that path alone.

Jack glanced down at the young woman who had stumbled back a few steps from his presence. “It would seem I must disappoint you.”

She sighed. “I am most accustomed to it, I assure you.”

“I beg your pardon?”

She shook her head and smiled grimly. “Nothing, Your Grace. I do hope your brother is well.”

“Thank you. He means a great deal to me,” he explained as he crossed back to the sideboard and plunked down his barely touched glass. “I will ensure Padraig fetches a hackney for you. Take it and go straight to Darkwell’s. The streets aren’t safe at night for such a treasure as you.”

Without allowing himself to contemplate her another moment, he strode from the room, praying she would not come back to bother his body or his troubled soul again.

CHAPTER 3

A town house, Green Park
Two o'clock in the afternoon

“My dear boy, you must convince your brother to leave off.”

Jack extended his fine, bone china cup to his Venus flytrap of a mother. Oh how he wished he need not have the prerequisite second cup but when his mother came to call, he couldn't exactly boot her out after the proper fifteen minute interlude. Much to the consternation of many a son, a mother, or at least his mother, was above the strict rules of the English calling code. “Which brother are you referring to, Madam?”

Hyacinth Eversleigh, the ever youthful Duchess of Hunt, teacup in hand, arched a black brow in a remarkable likeness to his twin's disdainful gesture.

The same twin that had danced upon the rooftop of their club last eve, champagne bottles in hand. Jack had spent considerable time talking his brother off the ledge.

“Jack, are you listening to your Mama?”

Jack coughed back a snort. God forbid he let his attention drift in her presence.

“You were saying?” He really didn't need to ask who was causing his mother her present state of vexation. Of all her family, the only one she actually actively disapproved of was the one who gave fresh definition to the words proper and duty. Grandmama. Her Grace, the Dowager Duchess of I'm Better Than Everybody, Mentally, Morally, and Physically.

And in truth, the old girl was. She'd sustained wind and weather, two husbands, two kings, and several prime ministers, not to mention a host of wives that she'd kept firmly in line with her ability to shut the doors of society forever upon one who didn't meet her favor.

Despite his awareness of these exasperating facts, Jack didn't immediately supply his grandmother's name. Fluffing his mother's colorful feathers gave him far too much delight, and she deserved it after hoisting him out of bed at one in the afternoon to face his toilette, a time she knew very well, unmanly as it might sound, he spent luxuriating upon his goose down bed rolling about in his Italian

silk sheets. One needed such rest after rescuing one's brother from taking a swan dive whilst drunker than a sailor.

Placing her own teacup and lace-thin saucer down upon the large, silver service tray embossed with cheeky angels and pomegranates, she snatched his blue and gold cup from his outstretched hand. With extreme ease, she hefted the silver teapot and poured out. . . Omitting the lemon he always took in his tea. Indubitably, punishment for his purposeful and artificial ignorance. "The *dowager* of course," she intoned dramatically. "Who else could cause me so much vexation?"

It never failed to amaze Jack the way in which the fate of the gods worked. He and the baby of the family, his sister Gemma, were his mother's favorites whereas Charles and his deceased brother Henry had been his father's and the dowager's. Lockhart (preposterous name, poor boy) had been the one to fall into the shady regions of general unappreciation. He often envied the boy his realms of mediocrity in a family known for extremes. As feelings of familial affection went, his mother couldn't stand his grandmother and the feeling was reciprocated. In fact, the only things that had kept his mother from a life in the country had been her own strong will and the fact that she'd become the Duchess whilst grandmama, in a bow to tradition, had had to retire in some respects. Still, the old girl ran the family and the dukedom with his gratitude.

Yet, from the beginning, his mother had deeply approved of Jack's road to sin, if not the reasons for it. And she was now leading Gemma dancing down a similarly decadent path. Frequently, he thanked God he had not been born a daughter, or the youngest. Aside from having let the family heir drown, being born in the middle was a rather nice place to lose oneself.

Jack took the teacup back and perched on the edge of the delicate, cream colored, French, gold gilded chair, wishing that he hadn't let his mother furnish his abode. It had seemed a wonderful idea on his twenty-first birthday to make her feel a part of his new establishment. She was a woman of perfect taste and he hadn't actually wished to take the time himself to do the townhouse up.

He hadn't been willing to face the idea of taking up the ducal London house as the duke. It never should have been his. And so, with the building of the large house in the expanding western part of London, he'd handed the reins over to his mother.

He'd been an idiot to allow it.

As if taking revenge for his departure from her nest, his sitting room was an odd cross between the reception room of the Tsar's Winter Palace and a Paris

brothel. There was gold everywhere, towering ceilings, gilt mirrors, blue and scarlet silk wall hangings, and (he cringed even at the thought of the plethora of cherubs) his rooms were littered with plump-cheeked, winged babies of both the facial and rear end variety. Why in God's name his mother thought he might like cherubs was beyond him.

The large portrait of Venus at her bath hanging above the fireplace? That he did approve of, if only because it sent his grandmother harrumphing every time she came to visit. The old girl really was quite amusing when in a snit. It really was quite shocking with its odd proportions, lack of romanticism, and the way she actually stared out with her violently dark eyes from the painting as if looking one right in the face. "And what has my dearest Grandmama done now?" he asked, eyeing the lemon, wondering if she would actually smack his hand if he tried for a slice.

Her Grace's eye actually twitched, the muscles quivering with indignation. "She's threatening to revoke my entrée into society if I do not curtail my amorous activities."

Jack snorted tea through his nose. After a few hacks, he swiped the Irish linen napkin, made by prodigiously accomplished nuns (nuns who would have a massive attack of apoplexy if they knew what he had gotten up to on more than one highly pleasurable and creative occasion with said napkins) and wiped the tea from his nose and chin.

This time, her lips twitched, and her sense of aggravation seemed to decrease slightly. "Really, Jack, must you be so provincial?"

"I do beg your pardon mother if I am not yet Parisian enough to speak of my mother's activities with ease." He scowled. Though his mother adored speaking of her adventures with his father and other men both titled and common, he'd never quite grown accustomed to it. She was his mother before she was a woman, after all. "It does give one certain disturbing images."

Her mouth fell open, aghast. "I could never do anything disturbing."

"Yes," he agreed quickly, but he was doing everything he could to keep an image of his mother and his father licking champagne off of each other from taking full and scarring form in his brain. After chancing once upon them on a trip home from Eton, he'd learned the extreme importance of making a great deal of noise when entering a room.

"No," he corrected himself. He opened his eyes as wide as they would go, hoping the sun pouring in the tall windows would eradicate the picture. "It's just that you are my mother."

“And you think you were delivered in a basket?” Her eyes rolled and she tsked. “I pushed you out over several hours of torture and the recovery of my—”

“Mother!” Jack slammed his teacup on the marble-topped side table beside his spindly chair and stared the woman down lest she go into the full and horrifying details about his arrival into this world or the night he was conceived. He knew both stories by heart and really wasn’t desirous of revisiting either, thank you very much.

His mother grinned and smoothed one of her beautiful, slender hands over her sea green taffeta. “It took a great deal of exercise to restore myself to my taut —”

A strangled note rather like a dying pigeon blurted past his lips.

“Jack,” she sighed, annoyance at being cut off in her rapturous account of her difficulties ripe in her voice. “Must you be so innocent?”

His face creased in horror as he desperately tried to scrub the dangerous direction his mother had led his thoughts from his traumatized mind. “Innocent? Innocent?”

She pursed her slightly rouged lips, lips that most girls in their first season would envy and certainly could never duplicate. Her Grace had only improved with age, much to the delight of the men of London and his grandmother’s feather fluffing annoyance. “Perhaps innocent is a wrongly chosen word, but what else may I speak of with my son if not such natural things as birth and conception?”

Jack snatched a cucumber sandwich from the tray between them and gobbled it, masticating furiously to prevent any ill-advised haste in his ability to reply to this preposterous question.

His mother peered at him with innocent eyes over her teacup, her long, black lashes batting in that infuriating manner she had, meant to assure those around her that she was completely benign. Benign as a praying mantis.

Jack chewed and chewed until there was nothing left to chew and when, at last, he was ready to direct the conversation away from this balls-shrinking topic, he cleared his throat. “Now, you know it doesn’t matter. She can’t give you the cut direct without my support. And you know I would never allow you to be tossed out of society.”

“True.” She pouted slightly at being directed away from her favorite subject, bed play, but rallied and picked up a pink iced cake and popped it into her mouth. “But it is the principle of the matter, my dearest. She has no business having such control at all over my affairs.”

“Grandmama is formidable. . . And I need her. I was never supposed to be the duke and she does what Henry was supposed to. . . What I can’t. . .” The words turned to sand in his mouth. It sounded so innocuous and yet he knew the words caused so much pain. He hated himself for letting them out.

Henry.

Perfect, wonderful Henry that everyone had loved, including himself. The eldest had been the kind of young man that everyone adored. Everyone had basked in Henry’s charismatic presence, hoping a little of his joyful persona might rub off on them.

Henry, who if not a favorite, had worshiped the ground their mother walked on. And now he was dead. “Mother, I didn’t mean—”

“Of course you didn’t, dear boy.” Even though she spoke with ease, her usual cheer dimmed considerably as her gaze darted to the window. She sniffed slightly and pressed her emerald-ringed hand to her mouth. After twenty years, she still missed Henry, her first born.

And he’d brought that suffering to her.

For an instant, he was a little boy again, stuttering, “I...I...D-didn’t mean it, father,” over Henry’s forever still, blue body.

“And your other brother,” his mother cut through his thoughts, forcing a smile to her lips. “Charles?”

Jack took his cue readily, wishing to see happiness restored to his mother’s usually mischievous eyes though Charles mightn’t be the surest course to that end. “Don’t you bestow your presence upon him?”

“My presence isn’t terribly welcome in his home,” she drawled.

Charles, perverse fellow that he was, couldn’t seem to stand being around her, having been the one to steal her beloved husband from her. She’d tried on repeated occasions to convince him how blameless he was, but every visit seemed to result in Charles’ achieving drunken stupors which would shame a St. Giles gin sot. “He’ll come around.”

“Of course he will.” She placed her teacup and saucer down with the barest of clunks and allowed herself to lean back against the gold embroidered chair, her skirts shifting about her like rippled cake icing. “He’s an Eversleigh.”

Jack fiddled with his napkin, folding and unfolding it, wondering how in the hell to ease the discomfort he’d managed to bring to this conversation. As much as he loved to agitate her, he hated to grieve her and because of this, he found himself suddenly blurting, “Have you spoken with the Duchess of Darkwell recently?”

His mother's brows waggled at the hint of ensuing gossip. "Kathryn?" she trilled, rolling the "r" as if the woman had been born in Spain and not Shropshire. "No. Why do you ask?"

Jack suddenly felt like a school boy on his first day at Eton. He should really just ask Ryder, but the idea of revealing his undue curiosity about the young woman who had stormed into his life wasn't an option he was willing to contemplate.

And though it would delight his mother, asking about the young woman who had turned his life into a violently shaken champagne bottle wasn't exactly the best laid plan. "She has a young lady staying with her I believe."

His mother cocked her head to the side, her diamond eardrops bouncing against her cheek. "And you are curious about her?"

"Yes," he said coolly, a lack of true interest imperative since he did not wish to supply the information that said young woman had followed him into a tavern. "I thought perhaps you could find it in your motherly heart to facilitate an introduction."

His mother began to chuckle. The chuckle turned into a full laugh until her eyes were watering and she pressed a hand to her lace-covered bodice.

Jack sat in squirming silence then finally gritted, "And what is so amusing?"

She attempted to stifle her laughter, her face contorting as she tried to gain composure, but then she began laughing again until she coughed at the length and force of her guffaws.

Shifting on his seat, Jack waited with a growing sense of foreboding. His mother's sense of humor was a terribly twisted one. "Elucidate, if you please."

"The Duchess' guest is quite a remarkable young lady. You should call upon Darkwell this afternoon. I know for a fact they shall all be in as I was to call upon them myself. The lady has only just arrived from Paris, I believe. Or so the grist mill says."

Jack sat a little straighter, amazed at the ease that all of this was going. "Thank you. I think I will."

"Oh, and do give her husband my regards."

"Husband?" he echoed as if he did not already know. "You know her husband?"

He had a great deal of experience with married women. Most of London knew he had the ability to ferret out a faithless woman and expose her to the world with more haste than a cat could twitch its whiskers at the sight of a scurrying mouse. Even so, when it came to married ladies, one did have to make

sure the husband wasn't going to come thundering in, pistol waving amidst melodramatic declarations of betrayal. Any information that his mother might impart would be most useful.

"Mmm, quite well." She glared down at her half-empty teacup. "I suppose it's too early for champagne?"

"Never for you mother." Jack stood and crossed to the bell pull by the fire. His mother's blood ran half French champagne, half *ton* scandal and who was he to deny her life's ready pleasures? She'd had enough suffering and sometimes he wished the *ton*, who sometimes cast a wary eye upon Hyacinth, could remember that.

His mother clasped her hands together upon her lap in anticipation. "As far as I can tell though, the lady deserves far better than her conjugal companion." Her eyes widened with the delight of truly scandalous tittle. "They have been apart for years."

Ah. A neglected wife. That explained her reserve and obvious inexperience. "For once mother, you've been extremely helpful."

"Why thank you, Jack," she said with a large note of graciousness.

And to think he'd been annoyed at his mother's call.

CHAPTER 4

Hyde Park

The Duchess of Darkwell's townhouse

Four o'clock

Cordelia tugged determinedly at the long sleeves of her sapphire blue, skin-covering frock and hoped to goodness it was suitable enough for a visit from her mother-in-law. She wanted to look like a nun. Apparently, in London, if one engaged in unwomanly behavior such as entertaining sheiks, Russian princes who fancied archaeology, or French dukes with the ability to persuade idiot Italians not to blast apart the pyramids, one was also likely a harlot. Digging about in the sand and leading groups of men without assistance also condemned her to the likes of Jezebel dancing gaily with the Antichrist as the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse brought the world to its fiery end. It had been most fascinating to discover just how badly her character had been painted.

Then again, given the duchess' own reputation, she probably wouldn't give two thoughts to her character. Still, she was taking no chances in this meeting. The high necked ensemble which only exposed her face, the barest hint of neck, and hands was the closest she could come to the garb of one who had taken the saintly veil.

The rest of her was swathed from head to toe, her frock quite simple, no bows or beads to pretty it up, and not a bit of jewelry for adornment (something she'd discovered she quite enjoyed and yet was not quite brave enough to wear in public as of yet). For the last fifteen years, she'd largely dressed in suitably altered garments. After all, the fashion of the day did not a female mountain goat make, and scampering over rocks was most certainly required of her in her daily activities.

Typically, her hair was a riot of curls pulled back in a serviceable twist and so she'd considered not using curling tongs upon her hair, but the maid had shrieked that such an aberration would simply be too much in Town and, frankly, she was astonished at how much she actually enjoyed the soft tendrils the maid had managed to tame her wild hair into, boring as the process had been. She'd managed to read a newssheet from front to back during the arduous toilette.

If her new look didn't scream respectability, nothing else could. And despite what London might be whispering, she was determined to pass herself off for exactly what she was, a virgin.

Her gaze skimmed the pink damask furniture, matching woven rug, and the striped silk walls. It was the room of a society woman and a society woman she was not.

A half-growl of frustration, half-sigh rushed past her lips. Everything was going completely contrary to her intentions. She'd planned to come to London, take part in what pleasure there was to be had given how little time she spent in society, and get the annulment done. She'd had no intention of brushing elbows with the *haute ton*.

For what was the *haute ton* but everything she had been taught to generally revile? Her father and mother valued the artists, the scientists, the rabble rousers of this world. They'd been one step away from supporting Napoleon and his Republican ways. After all, it was his journey to Egypt that had exposed the land's lost treasures. But her parents had been unable to support his arrogance and self-importance which had culminated in the little man declaring himself Emperor of the French. Her parents loathed the trappings of aristocracy. It mattered not that they were aristocrats themselves.

In any case, Cordelia had been raised to find lords and ladies unappealing. In fact the only thing that her parents had appreciated about the peerage was their patronage of their expeditions to the Etruscan hills and then the valleys of Egypt. Even so, they felt lords were only tolerable as long as they stayed on their estates shooting as many poor birds as they may, keeping their noses out of the affairs of running the world, silly creatures that they were.

That appreciation of patronage was the only reason she was staying under the Duke of Darkwell's roof. His wife's excessively wealthy father had been a patron and upon his death, Kate had kept up the funds. Over the years, she and the now Duchess of Darkwell had shared a correspondence, becoming friends over pages shunted to and fro across the globe.

She was grateful for such friendship now. If one had to stay in London, staying with a duchess who was also a dear friend was the only way to do it.

Cordelia lifted a hand to her cheeks. Cool. There was no heat in them. Not in this freezing country. Even in summer she was cold. She should be hot. Hot with indignation, and yet her inner fire couldn't quite make her fingers and face warm.

It was remarkable with what haste gossip spread, or how these pecking hens of society even wheedled the information out of the unwitting to begin with. They were worse than a group of grave robbers spreading word of a newly discovered tomb.

No doubt, one of Duchess Kathryn's servants had let Cordy's presence slip to someone else's servant on their day off and, well, it had resulted in Kathryn bustling in this morning with the news that the renowned Duchess of Hunt would be paying call.

It was most annoying that her plans had gone so far awry. Her day was already fairly consumed with appointments she had scheduled with her solicitor and a physician, both of whom were expected within the hour.

Could the day grow any worse?

Dread formed a formidable pool in her stomach at the impending doctor's visit. The very idea of an old man probing at her nether regions to ensure a bit of flesh was still in existence was most alarming. But the existence of that intact scrap of membrane was her assurance of relatively respectable freedom and show it she would.

Her mother-in-law? That was an entirely different and more than slightly harrowing affair.

Family was not her forte. She had no notion of it or how it operated beyond the furious and often violent fights that occurred between her now deceased parents and the odd, scrabbling relationship she had with her brothers. They were certainly not the picture of ideal domesticity.

The doorknocker clacked with a piercing tone and she nearly jumped out of her own already-sensitive skin. She whipped towards the closed, morning room door, her ears seeming to have some magical power of extraordinary hearing in her apprehension. Muffled voices filled the hall, along with the slight clatter of kid-booted feet.

This was the moment then.

She only prayed the Duchess of Hunt would view her with the same tolerant views the woman had on her own life, and not proclaim her a whore of Babylon. In either case, she folded her hands before her and once again girded her metaphorical loins.

The butler, Smythe, entered, his face as unreadable as a doctor's script. "Lady Gemma Eversleigh, my lady."

A whirl of cornflower blue ruffles and russet hair blew into the sunlit room. "My sister!" Lady Gemma squealed at the top of her girlish lungs. "At last!"

Cordelia staggered as the girl hurled herself forward and took her into her long arms. The scent of roses and peppermint candy surrounded Cordelia as did a mouthful of the girl's curled dark brown hair. Cordy stood still as a post, wrapped up in muslin and enthusiastic youth, waiting to wake up from this completely absurd dream. It was a dream. It most certainly had to be. And yet, her sister held on with remarkable force, bouncing on the balls of her toes in her glee.

Somewhere amidst all this, the door snicked shut, signifying Smythe's departure and the fact that she was now alone with Lady Gemma. But she had no idea what to do with her. Should she send her flying home or welcome her to tea? Considering she was going to be immersing the Eversleigh family in scandal very soon, home was probably the correct answer and yet, she couldn't bring herself to shoo Lady Gemma any more than she could kick a rambunctious puppy. Confound it, where was Kate when she needed her?

Lady Gemma pulled back and clasped Cordelia's hands, her heart-shaped face all smiles. "Oh dear. You're shocked, are you not?"

The girl before her had the ungainly body of one who had not quite reached womanhood, but was old enough to be on the verge of desiring all things inappropriate. Twin dimples teased the corners of her pink mouth and her soft blue striped gown was a perfect match for her almond-shaped eyes that were very nearly violet. Those eyes shone with absolute enthusiasm, the kind only the very young and those still foolish enough to believe in love exuded.

Cordy made several ungraceful motions with her mouth which no doubt resembled the habits of a certain genus of codfish. "Y-yes. I must admit I am."

"Well," Lady Gemma squeezed her hands, her blue and lace fringed reticule bouncing against their wrists. "The moment I read you were in town, I knew there was only one thing to do," she bubbled brightly. "You see, my grandmama, the dowager duchess," the dowager duchess was said in a dramatic and slightly mocking tone, "would never condone the visit. You have quite the reputation, you know."

Lady Gemma's brows waggled and her voice lowered as one's does when about to confess a dire sin. "So, I snuck out this afternoon whilst she was organizing some charity ball or the other and decided that I must come and see you!"

"Mother is coming later I believe, and I wanted to be the first to welcome you and warn you that though we might seem like a mad-capped and intimidating lot, we are really quite nice and you shall be very happy in our

family.” Lady Gemma’s smile dimmed and her white lace gloved hand flew to her Cupid’s bow mouth. “Oh! Am I talking too much? I’m certain I am. Grandmama is always telling me—”

“Lady Gemma,” Cordelia charged in before the girl kept rattling on, charming as she was. She hadn’t felt this overblown since being held captive by a desert tribe, entertained by the ladies of the camp who could not seem to stop teasing her for her incorrect pronunciations of their native dialect or her odd adaptation of their dress.

“Yes?” Lady Gemma’s smile returned in full force as did her firm clasp on both Cordy’s unwitting hands.

In the vast and epic speech, one thing had stood out. Something which alarmed Cordy right down to her little toes. “You read about me?”

Lady Gemma nodded, her large, blue bonnet and peacock feathers bobbling slightly at her eagerness. “Certainly. You’ve made quite a splash.” She hesitated a moment and her lips pouted. “I say, how long have you actually been in London? It was very bad of you not to come see me and leave the calling to my poor self. I’m sure Grandmama has already taken note of your poor manners.”

Cordelia closed her suddenly throbbing eyes, wishing she could sink through the floor and find herself magically back in the endlessly rolling sands and cavernous rocky valleys of Egypt. After all, one of Faisal’s friends had voiced a considerable interest in her.

If she grew tired of her brothers, she could be a desert princess. She could. She liked fast horses, dry heat, majestic tents decked with every luxury, and she could learn to live without champagne and brandy. Mint tea was delicious and dates were really quite tasty, especially when drenched in honey.

A lifetime as an old man’s darling, decorated with jewels and given stallions as a sign of undying admiration, wouldn’t be so bad, would it?

Hmmm. Perhaps it would. She couldn’t quite imagine herself obeying the rather strict orders that the tribesmen gave to their wives. . . But perhaps—

“Your Grace?” Lady Gemma asked plaintively. “Your Grace, are you listening?”

Your Grace. Those two words sucked the air right out of her. She rarely told people she was a duchess. After all, how did one explain the complete disinterest of one’s husband, the duke? It made for horribly awkward conversations. But for now, she was indeed Her Grace, the Duchess of Hunt. But not for long.

She forced herself to open her eyes and smile with as much goodwill as she

could muster. Her voice, on the other hand, wasn't quite so cooperative and her "Do sit down," came out a trifle unbridled. But how often exactly was one ambushed by a sister-in-law of the husband one had only just met?

Not often, so a lack of collectedness could certainly be forgiven. Couldn't it? Her mother would say no, but her mother had never been in quite such a strange position. Well, that wasn't exactly true. . . Cordelia grabbed hold of her thoughts before they were halfway to India in the palace of her mother's infamous Raj. "Please, do sit," she repeated with a great deal more elegance.

Lady Gemma finally relinquished her hands, now that she knew she was being asked to stay and took a few steps back and plunked herself onto the pink, silk sofa, balancing her wrist on the ivory embossed arm. "Why, thank you."

"Tea?" That was what every race in the world seemed to drink when everything went pear shaped. Some did hit the bottle of course, and she wouldn't mind a tippie herself, but breaking out the brandy in front of Lady Gemma didn't seem a viable option given its lack of propriety and the fact that this girl, as impressionable and eager as she appeared, would no doubt start swilling the stuff from her exceedingly expensive slipper.

"Certainly." Lady Gemma eyed her up and down, her lips pursing in critical thought. "I must admit, my dear sister, I thought you'd be dressed more scandalously. Given what I read, you see."

Worse and worse. What exactly had Lady Gemma expected? Cordelia in Arab dress, lounging on a cushion, smoking a hookah? She'd done that certainly, but would hardly do such a thing in London. At least, not in the presence of such as Lady Gemma. Now Lady Gemma's brother, most infuriating man that he was, she could only imagine what it might be like to lie on a cushion with him. . .

That absent heat suddenly bloomed in her cheeks, accompanied by a most shocking tingle that danced along her legs and her stomach.

Desperately trying to collect herself, Cordelia hurried to the bell pull by the fire and tugged it as mightily as she could without pulling the thing free from the plastered wall. "Where exactly was it that you read about me?"

Lady Gemma beamed with pride, her chest puffing out, her frills trembling. Who was it who dressed the girl in such frothy, childlike concoctions? They should be taken out at first light and made to stand before a cannon. Lady Gemma was far too bold for such foibles.

"Since Grandmama tells me nothing," Lady Gemma bemoaned, wronged clearly by said grandmama beyond all measure, "I am a devoted reader of all the sheets. A Most Concerned Bachelor writes my favorite papers. Quite scandalous

of course, but he discusses anyone who is absolutely anyone, don't you know. And let me confide to you, you are quite the someone."

She'd been mentioned in a newssheet? A scandalous newssheet? Oh, now that was too amusing, if one found being tossed upside down and drowned in the Thames amusing. How in God's name was she going to convince anyone that she was a virgin when her name was being trampled upon?

Lady Gemma leaned forward, her eyes widening with a conspiratorial light. "They say you are here to make my brother wildly jealous and that you two will begin a grand passion. Is this true? Oh!" she exclaimed. "I should love it if you did. The only grand passion I have ever seen was my parents and that hardly counts, does it? Do you think you could allow me to watch a bit of—"

"Lady Gemma!" Even she could barely countenance the idea (not for lack of detail but rather inclination) of a grand passion between herself and Jack Eversleigh, Duke of Hunt.

Lady Gemma blinked innocently. "Yes?"

Cordy swallowed, trying to decide how to say what needed to be said to a girl about to be launched upon society. Though launching Lady Gemma was going to be more like launching a Spanish galleon than a young and proper woman. She couldn't exactly say, "I'd rather be ruined by a whole raiding party than your brother", despite and, perhaps, because of his obvious skill with women, so she settled with a more careful, "What you are saying—"

Lady Gemma's eyes narrowed and she leaned forward so far she was nearly off the couch. "Then it is not true?"

"No. It is not." Cordelia said it with as much finality as she could find within her. Encouraging Lady Gemma was not something she was willing to do. One might find herself in a full parade being lauded about London as the new Duchess of Hunt if she was not careful.

Lady Gemma's eyes widened to two pools of abject tragedy. "No grand passion?"

Passion? Oh, passion was quite a possibility. There had been one moment when she had been certain Jack was going to kiss her. It had nearly burned her to a cinder, that tantalizing and most upsetting moment. The word grand didn't even begin to describe what her traitorous physique had experienced in his presence. Fire, wicked, blazing fire that would scorch and consume any who was absorbed in its heat was the only way she could think of how his hands had felt upon her flesh. No wonder half the female population of London worshipped him like the ancient Egyptians had worshipped their all-powerful Ra. Which was

why it would never happen again, not whilst an annulment was still a consideration. “Definitely not.”

Lady Gemma flung herself back, all propriety disappearing as she slouched with disappointment. “Then what are you here for, if not to make him jealous?”

Cordelia drew herself up, prepared to finally begin severing her ties from the Hunt family. She could not tell the truth, that she was here for an annulment, for no one would believe it given her reputation. At least, not until the doctor could give his report. “The only thing your brother could want from a woman of my reputation.”

Lady Gemma cocked her head to the side, confusion written upon her pert features. “Which is?”

“Divorce.”

CHAPTER 5

“*No!*” This salacious bit of information was clearly too much for Lady Gemma, because she bounded right out of the seat she had only just taken, her whole body aquiver. “I shan’t allow it.”

Cordelia took a step back at the full force of the girl’s determination. “I beg your pardon?”

“I shan’t allow it,” she said indignantly, her chin lifting with the same kind of passion one showed to king and country when Rule Britannia was being played by a full military band.

Clearly, the girl needed to be soothed. Cordy lifted a conciliatory hand. “I know it is quite a scandal—”

“Ha! Scandal! I say *ha* again.”

Hmmm. Either the girl was far more familiar with scandal than Cordy had first believed or another tack was needed. “The difficulty of understanding—”

“I understand very well, thank you,” Lady Gemma said tightly. “You don’t wish to be my sister.”

Now, that stopped Cordy. She blinked. When precisely had she said anything of that nature? It also managed to strike a surprising chord. She’d never actually had a sister. Brothers most certainly, irritating souls that they were. But the idea that she didn’t want a sister? She’d always longed to have another female to be close to, to confide in. Her mother had been an impossibility. A distant, divinely tempestuous creature who didn’t foster anything but awe. “I never—”

“If you divorce my brother, you shan’t be my sister any longer and I won’t allow it.”

“Lady Gemma,” she said carefully, a sudden and foolish ache in her heart. Her own family was the oddest hodgepodge with archaeology, not affection, being the bedrock that held it together and here, this ferocious girl was clinging on to her steadfastly. She almost wished they could be family. But the type of family Gemma desired was a concept Cordy couldn’t truly understand, not in the way that Lady Gemma did. “There are far more appropriate ladies to be your sister.”

“Bugger appropriate. I want you.”

A laugh bubbled out of her throat. She couldn't help it. The girl standing so tenaciously before her meant every word she said and Cordelia couldn't help seeing a large degree of herself in the young woman. For when Cordy wanted something, she let nothing stand in her way, and her bullheaded surety was only tainted by the gradually learned bitter truth about the nature of the world and the people in it. "You have no idea as to my character, Lady Gemma."

"I am made aware of the most pertinent facts," she said defensively.

"Indeed?" Cordy couldn't stop her brows from rising. If the girl did know, she was quite brave to wish to ally herself with such a pariah. Or, at least, a pariah in certain circles. In other circles, she was on her way to being the first gem. Despite her bizarre ways and dress, she'd held Paris in her palm.

"You are exactly the opposite of what Grandmama wants for our family," she said firmly, her eyes probing with the need to make herself clear, "and so you are exactly what we need."

A sigh heaved past Cordelia's lips. "If the dowager duchess would hate me then it—"

"Loathe," Lady Gemma put in.

Cordy took the word in for a full moment before stuttering, "I-I beg your pardon?"

"This morning," Lady Gemma supplied with a twirl of her fingertips. "She read the paper and said she loathed women of your sort and that they were a warning to me, lest I should fall into a similar pattern."

A surprising flare of resentment and desire to trounce upon the dowager duchess' upturned nose rushed through her. Perhaps, if the dowager duchess had come to her aid years ago, her life would not have headed down such an offensive path. But then again, if this was her attitude, she was rather glad she'd been left to rot, digging up petrified beetles. "Oh, she did, did she?"

"Yes." Lady Gemma had the good grace to look a trifle ashamed of her grandmama before declaring, "And all I can say is I long to fall into a similar pattern."

"No." She rolled her eyes at the girlish ignorance and romanticism of the bumpy road that was a woman's independence in a world owned and controlled by men. "You don't."

"Yes, I do. Anything would be better than the endless circle of boring parties filled with boring ladies. But you! You have been the lover of a sheik, a Russian prince, and a French duc." Gemma let out a sigh of sheer delight, her face rapt.

That was not actually true. She'd kept company with them as intellectual equals but she had never, ever been their lover. In fact, she'd never even been kissed, so separate from the world of amour she'd been.

Taking this aspect away from Gemma's statement, these relationships weren't even the beginning of the scandalous things Cordelia had done. If Gemma admired such behavior, Jack's sister was headed for ruin if someone didn't take her in hand. But who was she to tell the girl she was wrong?

Society, dictated by men, was designed to steal all the individuality and power from its women, and ensure they were far beneath the lords who controlled them.

Smythe opened the door and entered with a small, tiered, tea tray and behind him Kathryn, Duchess of Darkwell, strode in, her verdant skirts whooshing. A cat and cream smile tilted her lips the moment she spotted their guest. "Lady Gemma! What a pleasant surprise."

Lady Gemma beamed. "Your Grace."

"Kathryn," Cordy hissed. "Do you have any idea what is transpiring?"

Kate tossed back her golden head and let out a delicious laugh. "I do hate to tell you, but you are the talk of the town, my dear. I think you have even replaced me as the most scandalous woman in London."

"Why didn't you tell me?" she demanded. She was well aware that Kathryn, once free of her now deceased husband, had gone on a mad whirl of freedom. Apparently, the fellow had been the sort of man who believed that a woman should behave like a virgin, even after her wedding night. Kate's life had changed entirely when he had vacated this world. In fact, it had been her determination to embrace a naughty life that had led her into the arms of her present husband, the Duke of Darkwell, formerly known as the Duke of Debauchery.

Kathryn shrugged her shoulders, her breasts pressing at the square cut bodice of her green gown. "I thought it best to ease you into the news rather than have you read such details in the sheets."

"You thought?" she echoed. The room spun and she felt suddenly quite ill.

Kate turned to Smythe. "Bring a bottle of brandy. I think Her Grace has had quite a shock."

"Splendid!" cheered Lady Gemma, clapping her gloved hands together.

"None for you," warned Cordelia. The last thing she was going to have was Lady Gemma three sheets to the wind when her mother arrived.

Lady Gemma lowered her chin and said mischievously, “I thought you didn’t want to be my sister.”

“That’s not exactly—”

“So, you need not censure my behavior.”

Cordelia threw herself down into the nearest chair and placed a hand over her suddenly throbbing eyes. “Fine. Drink brandy. Drink the bottle and dance a jig in the square.”

“What a spectacular proposition,” teased Kate. “I say we all do it. Three bottles, Smythe.”

Smythe didn’t even wrinkle his forehead or bat a lash at the extravagant and ill-advised request. “The 83 madam or the 76?”

Kate gasped, fluttering her hand over her bosom in mock horror. “Need you ask?”

“The 76 then,” Smythe said flatly before he bowed and exited with the fleet feet needed when heading after the special vintage reserved for moments of disaster such as a dramatic spat with her duke or the ever threatening death of the monarch.

“Would you like to see it?” proposed Lady Gemma with a decided hint of breathless anticipation.

Cordy lifted her head, a Herculean task for the moment, and dared herself to open her eyes. “See what exactly?”

Lady Gemma brandished her reticule. “Snodgrass’ comments,” she gushed with a note of worship that one often sees in those who are about to scamper over burning coals.

Cordelia goggled. “You have them with you?”

“Oh, I never go anywhere without something sensational to read and I’ve already read your report several times. It’s quite inspiring.”

“Dear God,” groaned Cordelia.

“For all your years of unrepressed living,” Kate turned slightly and readjusted a flounce on her skirts, “you aren’t taking this very well, Cordy.”

“Cordy?” piped Gemma. “May I call you Cordy? I wish I could have such a delightful nickname.”

“Yes. Yes, you may call me Cordy,” Cordelia said quickly before the girl could start in any further on the marvelousness of her name, and then swung her gaze to Kate and narrowed her eyes. “And I am not taking this well as it runs contrary to all my plans.”

Kathryn waggled a ruby-ringed finger at her. “As a good friend once told me, plans are made to be changed.”

Cordelia sat up straighter. “I do not concur. To be freed from my husband—”

“Oh, please don’t!” wailed Gemma.

The sound was enough to shatter glass or unman a regiment. “Gemma. . .” Cordelia began slowly, “may I call you Gemma?”

Gemma smiled graciously. “Please do.”

“Gemma, you must begin to accept—”

The doorknocker sounded with a resounding thud on the front step.

“It’s Mother!” crowed Gemma. “You shall love her. You two are birds of a similar feather, after all.” Gemma fumbled with her reticule. “Shall I read the Snodgrass bit over our brandy? I know she would love it—” Lady Gemma’s brow wrinkled, “Though she would prefer champagne to brandy. She says ladies only drink champagne and as long as one adds a bit of fruit, it doesn’t matter the time of day—”

A whimper filled the room. Her whimper? Cordy winced. It certainly sounded so. She had stood toe to toe with Arab princes, cracked brained archaeologists, and French aristocrats pudding brained on absinthe. The Hunt family? Their madness dwelt in a whole other realm of madness.

Cordelia drew in a deep breath. Everything was going to be well. She’d soon have the situation back into her usually very confident and capable hands. She smoothed her palms down the front of her frock determined to find the bright side and she rose from her chair, as ready as she’d ever be to meet her mother-in-law. At least, small favors, Gemma had yet to begin imbibing. She wouldn’t have to explain a soused young lady to her mama.

Smythe entered, a tray laden with three decanters of brandy balanced easily upon his snowy gloved hand as he announced, “His Grace, the Duke of Hunt.”

Cordelia dug her nails into her palms, willing herself to disappear. She’d been wrong. So very wrong. Things could not get worse. Because clearly, the Gods of Fate had decided to take her situation from bizarre to Hell in the space of one English tea time.

CHAPTER 6

Jack strode into the well-appointed, if feminine, room, ready and eager to shock his astonishing young woman with his deft skills in teasing out her location. Once she was suitably impressed, they could continue their rather odd yet captivating meeting. As sure as he'd been that he should stay away just the night before, he couldn't drive her from his thoughts and felt certain that by meeting with her once more, especially in the light of day, he would be able to allay his curiosity and discover she was, indeed, average in every way. Or at least not worth his considerable interest.

Nothing could have prepared him for the sight of his good friend the Duke of Hunt's wife, Kathryn, and his young woman, looking decidedly primmer even than when he had first set eyes upon her, and his *sister* all in animated female chatter.

In the same room.

"What the hell are you doing here, Gemma?" he roared, completely disregarding a reasonable approach. Reason and his sister did not mix.

He knew his mother was out to ruin the girl, but this? This was too much. Gemma being in the presence of these two women, their feet firmly planted in scandalous behavior, was nothing short of corruption. Kathryn, though a duchess, had been one foot away from total ruin this time last year, and his young woman clearly was not far behind, given that she'd been alone at night in a tavern.

Gemma squared her shoulders, the frills of her frock trembling, and arched her brown brow in the infamous Hunt fashion. "I was merely greeting your *wife*. I'm glad to see you've come to do the same."

"You know Grandmama is going to have a fit at—" his voice died off abruptly.

Wife.

He most certainly wasn't married to Kathryn or his sister so the only possible lady in question was Cordelia. His eyes swung to her, waiting for her to deny it. Praying with every fiber of his being that she would.

She did not. In fact, she stood stoically, her face a most fascinating mask of chagrin and seeming annoyance that he had appeared.

He blinked. Searching through the mire of memory to that date he had been shackled to some young chit in a far off land all because his father thought it a lark to gamble his most abhorred son away.

Cordelia.

The name.

He should have remembered it, but he'd been trying to forget it since the first day he'd heard it proclaimed in that dry and boring ceremony some fifteen odd years ago. He'd said it once and never uttered it or gave thought to it again. No one else had either, thusly driving it to the furthest and dustiest corner of his recollections.

Now the name thundered forth like the booming of a Beethoven symphony.

She stood so straight one might have thought she'd had a poker rammed up her lovely backside. She looked as pained as if someone had indeed done such a thing to her gorgeous posterior, a posterior which he had found himself fantasizing about in a voracious manner.

His mother's words rattled through his brain like the gunshot of a firing squad. Cordelia Basingstoke was in a marriage where the husband wasn't present.

A neglected wife.

How interesting that his mother should refrain from mentioning that neglect wasn't even the half of it. It was hard to treat a woman badly when he'd never met her or spoken of her, except in a sort of vague boyish understanding that he could never ask a girl of his choosing for her hand. But neglect? He'd entirely pretended that she wasn't in existence. So thoroughly pretended that he'd succeeded in forgetting all pertinent facts about her.

When next he saw his mother, the woman was going to be laughing her beautiful head off, and he might just have to commit matricide, but that was for later. Right now, he wanted to hear what the hell Cordelia was doing in London, acting like a woman out to ruin herself, and having the gall to meet him and not disclose their relationship immediately. She'd let him believe they were complete strangers. . . Which they were and yet . . . Damn it. This wasn't to be tolerated. "Explain yourself, madam," he boomed.

Her face flushed and anger snapped in her shockingly blue eyes. "You sir, are behaving like an ass," she ground out. "And I will not explain myself to an ass."

“Ass?” he repeated dryly, fairly sure she could not have just laid down such a hot-blooded challenge. No. Not even she would have the gall to act the wounded party in this absurd situation. She’d come to London to make his life Hell and she’d made a fool of him last night, that whole meeting, where she held the upper hand, knowing their relationship whilst she left him in the dark. What a fool she must have thought him, when he asked if she were married.

“Yes,” she said tightly, her whole body suddenly shaking with fury. “You have no right to ask me anything given your irresponsible behavior since I have come of age.”

Rights? He had more rights than she had hairs on her head if she was, indeed, his wife. He could chuck her into their coldest castle in the most northern tip of Scotland and never, ever think on her again and be perfectly within his *rights*. There were one or two other rights that suddenly occurred to him and caused his entire body to tense with a sudden awareness.

Even as he considered that he could send the other two women from the room and shag her senseless as her *husband*, he couldn’t ignore the fact she had a valid point. He had, indeed, left her to her own devices.

However, that didn’t stop his lack of intention to yield in the face of her sudden appearance. “Leave us,” he commanded his sister and Duchess Kathryn without letting his gaze trail from his opponent. He couldn’t think of a more appropriate word for her in this circumstance.

“But I wish—”

“Gemma,” he said, her name a low warning. As much as he loved his sister, he didn’t wish her to be present at the destruction of a nonexistent marriage between two people obviously capable of such duplicity, lack of caring, and neglect to propriety. He knew his excuse. He couldn’t possibly imagine what Cordelia’s could be, a supposedly well-bred woman.

“Not until I have your assurance you won’t make Cordy hate you,” Gemma huffed.

“Cordy?” he echoed. His sister had not just called his. . . his. . . Damnation, he couldn’t say it. “Out,” he ordered.

“It’s for the best,” Cordelia, *Cordy*, said kindly to his sister making him seem a complete and utter bear. “Truly, all shall be well.”

Gemma’s chin wobbled slightly and then she stormed up to him and punched him sharply on the shoulder. “I like her.” Her violet eyes glittered with truth and warning. “Don’t let her divorce you.”

He gaped down at his sister wondering if there was anyone else who could blast away with such a font of shocking information in so short a span of time.

Divorce?

Which could only mean one thing. His. . . That woman had definitely had intimacy with other men. It was the only reason she would request a divorce, because they most certainly had never consummated their marriage. Not that her fornicating about should be any sort of surprise. Nor should he be so profoundly out of sorts about it. He had left her to her own vices for years for Christ's sake, and it wasn't as if he had thought she'd be some sort of nun. . .

But the full knowledge she had been with other men drummed his sense into the corner of his brain, letting some other far more dominant beast out. He should have known she wasn't innocent.

A virgin would have declared herself immediately in the bold light of day in the presence of some toad of a chaperone not pushed her way into his presence in such a scandalous place.

Jack's breath tightened in his throat at the slow dawning that in all aspects of society, she belonged to him. The growing realization of this point and the contemplation of her lush body wrapped in such a chaste gown were heating his loins in a most infuriating fashion.

She belonged to him.

There was even a paper in his parish church to prove it.

With an audible sniff, Gemma bolted from the room, Kathryn in her wake. However, Kate paused and threw him a knowing glance. A glance which made him long to throttle the woman for taking his. . . his. . . (He still couldn't say the word). . . into her house. Kathryn was a scandalous woman but one who wouldn't hesitate to go into battle for a friend. She might even try to enlist her husband to side with Cordelia. The idea of being at odds with his closest friend, Ryder, only enraged him further. He answered her look with a haughty rise of his brow.

She let out a huff, muttering about stubborn asses as she left the room.

When at last they were completely alone, the tray of brandy on the small table between them, he allowed himself to take her in. He was expecting a pert creature with an odd sort of sensuality about her. The same creature who had so engaged him before.

Terse words, cutting eyes, and an underlying presence of continual questioning made one long to be in her presence despite her bold and blunt nature. Too bad she was such a liar.

Jack ground his teeth down in an attempt to direct his growing frustration to some outlet. Her uncanny allure was far worse than the night before, if only because of her dress.

Her dark blue frock, which should have made her seem a dowdy, clung to her curves like a second skin. The austerity of the costume only emphasized the snapping intelligence in her eyes and her innate confidence.

It was utterly clear that though she was not beautiful and quite possibly unaware of her true potential to affect the male sex, Cordelia Eversleigh, Duchess of Hunt, did not need adornment to rip a man's soul out and hold it in her hands.

With her governess inspired gown and her haughty gaze, her very presence announced she would not be cowed before him. Quite the contrary. She was an insurmountable height that could only be climbed by the most intrepid and determined of men.

In other words, she was that thing that men prized above all else. . . A challenge. A bona fide intelligent and, simultaneously, sensual challenge.

She lifted her chin a notch, not even a hint of weakness or intimidation in her as she demanded quietly, "Did you come here for the woman you met last night my lord, or your wife who you have doubtlessly now read or heard about, a prepossessing harlot?"

Her harsh words slapped him. Slapped him hard enough he had no ready reply. But the more he imagined her entwined in the arms of other men, their cocks deep within her hot sheath, the angrier he became. It didn't matter that it was irrational, that he had never claimed her, that she deserved a lover, or that she looked like a fiery seraph.

All that mattered was the all-consuming, sanity stealing knowledge that she was his, and she had given herself to others. So he found himself wishing to be cruel rather than kind. . . To think with his outraged masculinity rather than his rational self. As an unfortunate result, he shrugged. "Both women seem to be strumpets, madam, do they not?"

He'd barged into this abode for that wildly intelligent young woman with the wicked eyes. He'd found her and his ruin in one fell swoop. As last night had worn on, he'd been consumed by the desire to find her, strip her bare, and give himself over to her. He didn't want the Duchess of Hunt, his wife. He wanted the woman who worshipped rocks.

But his words, hanging in the air between them, came out cutting like the sharpest sword.

In the briefest of moments, a half-breath even, everything changed. That open, unrestricted nature of hers vanished, replaced by a wall so high about her heart and soul, manifesting in her stormy eyes, it was clear that no army, no matter how fierce, could scale it.

Her face blanched a strange pallor under her slightly golden skin. "Thank you."

Her thanks gave him another pause. The words should have caused him to retract his venomous fury. They didn't. They just seemed to stir his brain about until he didn't know what he felt. For reasons he couldn't quite fathom, anger was still at the forefront and anger's brother, stupidity of speech, reared its ugly head. "I beg your pardon?"

"For your honesty," she drawled evenly before taking in a slow breath, clearly gathering herself for imminent battle. "Let us always be honest."

"Given your performance during our last encounter and what you say is being declared about you, I doubt you capable of honesty." He wanted to punch himself. Why did he keep saying such provocative drivel? Full-fledged war did not appeal to him. When it came to women, he was a seducer, not a fighter.

Yet, for reasons unfathomable to him, he couldn't stop himself. It was one thing when she'd been a woman to exchange pleasure with, but she was something else now. She'd come to London to make a fool of him. He shouldn't care. All men were inevitably made fools of by women, he'd seen it often enough. Because it was *her*, a woman his black heart had dared to momentarily ache for, he cared. He cared with the burning force of a thousand suns and the fact that he cared only infuriated him further. . . pushing him down the verbal road of doom.

"Oh," she countered tartly, "I do take heed to your so clearly expressed opinions of my morality or lack thereof." She cocked her head to the side, "For which, Your Grace pot, I do believe you have called the kettle black." Her long curls danced over her shoulder as she narrowed her eyes and finished, "You make certain my heart is hard which ensures the voracity of my intentions."

"You have a heart, my lady?" he riposted. The words *my lady* drawled out of his mouth as a sort of curse that seized his heart and terrified him because in every sense of the word but one, she was his lady. God how his body sang to take her, to kiss her, to know her passionate intelligence in a binding way that left nothing between them but scorched bodies and requited lust.

"What was left of it is gone now." She shrugged. "Hearts, while pleasant things, have no practical use in the pursuit of one's future happiness."

“Thank the maker then that your rather attractive body and your seeming intelligence makes up for the lack of such a vital organ in a woman.”

“Vital?” She laughed, a rich, soul seducing, thought stealing reverberation. “The only vital organ I have to a man is quite a different one in my experience, and alas, it is not the brain of which I speak.”

Why was this so resoundingly horrid?

He’d hurried here, ripe for the pleasure of her unusual company not pain. Yet pain was exactly what this was, as if they were both trying to get as many cuts in before the true battle began. Where was the pert creature who’d bandied with him so delightfully? He missed her, but all too quickly, he knew that woman had been an illusion and this taunting siren was the real Cordelia, Duchess of Hunt. “A woman’s brain is known to be smaller and therefore inferior,” he said lightly, aiming the dart carefully. “No wonder men care more for this *other* organ. And you have not neglected it, have you? Not if you are asking for a divorce.”

Bright color stained her pale cheeks but then her brows rose carelessly, the meaning clear.

“A woman,” she said lowly, her voice final, “must find her pleasure elsewhere, Your Grace, when her husband will not do his marital duty.”

A snarl, a veritable snarl, passed his lips. He was not sure if his fury resulted from her insults, the shock of their union, or the fact that she did, indeed, seem to think so little of him. “You hate me then?”

She laughed again, this time the sound a rich, buttery lilt. “No. Hate requires far too much effort. I feel nothing but irritation that I have a husband at all.”

“That is why you came to London?” he asked flatly, still shaken by the force of her laugh upon his body. Still undone by the fact that her base opinion of him struck home in a way he had not known since his father first made it clear how worthless he was. “Because you feel nothing for me.”

“Except inconvenience.”

That gave him pause. She found him to be an inconvenience? What a change in circumstance. Wasn’t it he who found women to be irrelevant and disloyal? “And you wish a divorce?”

She brought her hands together and clapped slowly. “Bravo. Does repetition improve the word?” She strode towards him, none of the sensuality or openness that had guided her the night before in her body. Instead, she seemed closed and unattainable. “I wish my independence.”

“To. . . To. . .” His skin crawled at the very idea of other men’s hands upon her.

“Be with other men?” she queried, her eyes sparking at his discomfort. “Yes, Your Grace, since you have given no indication in the past years,” her voice dropped and there was an edge of pain to it, “to ensure I had no need of them.”

“And what if now—” He cut himself off, the words completely ridiculous and inspired from his cock, not his brain. He couldn’t go down that path. It had been one of the great appeals of being married and yet not being married. He’d never had to be a husband. He’d never had to test the loyalty of his wife or risk failing so utterly again in the eyes of one he loved.

“What if you wish me now?” she finished for him. She took another few steps forward until the hem of her skirts brushed his boots. She glanced up through her lashes, her very nearness a dare. A dare born of anger and resentment. “What matters is that I do not wish you.”

Just like everyone else. No one wanted him. Not the real him.

Just those few words negated any sort of chivalry he might have still held close. Didn’t want *him*? She wanted his body. He knew that for certain. After all, her lips, those full, heady lips, were halfway open and all he could think of was the night before when he had so very nearly kissed her. “And if I wished to know what I shall be missing? What I have given up?”

“By all means,” she licked her lower lip slightly, moistening it, challenging him, and yet a moment of vulnerability softened her features before she whispered, “have it, then have done.”

The scent of vanilla and cinnamon surrounded him and the heat of her near body teased his already simmering senses. His mind was playing the most devilish tricks. He’d come here to continue what they had started, but if he were to do so with his. . . With his wife. . . what would occur?

Everything would change. Absolutely everything. If he bedded her, there would be no going back because then he would have to prove her unfaithfulness beyond all doubt to be rid of her. The entire world, but most importantly, he, himself, would know that he had shared her with God knew how many others. And debauched as he was, he wasn’t sure that was something he quite wished to do. He’d had enough married women. Having his own would be perhaps one too many.

She shook her head. “You see, even now, you do not truly wish—”

Silencing the doubting voices in his head, giving way to the demands of his body, and a sadistic part of his soul, he crushed her to him and brought his mouth down on hers. It was a kiss meant to punish. To punish for putting him in such a position. For the pleasure they were meant to share and yet now could not.

A peep of indignation bubbled up from her throat and she resisted for a moment, her body tense and hard angles in his embrace as if she'd never been kissed at all.

He didn't cease because he had to believe that what had happened last evening had not been a creation of his hunger for her, and that she truly did desire him as much as he had desired her. She had to, even her hate of him, couldn't change that could it?

The answer came when her body softened against his and her hands slid over his arms and held him to her fiercely.

A moan of sheer need replaced her protest and she opened to him. He slid his tongue into her hot mouth, licking and teasing her. With each moment that passed, their kisses were more and more consumed by the fiery exchange of breath, the hot strokes of tongues and lips.

His hard cock pressed against his breeches, proof how badly he wanted her. It was all he could do not to lay her down on the floor, tug up her skirts and find the evidence of her own desire.

This kiss had to last. He wrapped his arms around her, pulling her up against his chest and on the tips of her toes until the only thing keeping her upright was his strength.

When at last he'd explored every corner of her mouth, he kissed her jaw, then buried his face into the tender flesh of her barely-bared neck. They clung to each other in the knowledge that at any moment they could pull apart and never touch again.

He pressed open-mouthed kisses to her throat as she dropped her head back giving him all the access he could ever desire. The wild beat of her blood pounded beneath his lips, maddening his desire to tear her clothes from her limbs and kiss every last inch of her. He nibbled slightly at the delicate skin hovering above her collarbone and she gasped, her fingers digging into his arms, the pleasure as intense for her as it was for him at giving it to her.

As he kissed slow, hot kisses along the base of her throat, he slid one hand up her tight bodice, caressing her body through the layers of silk and undergarments.

She arched against him and, for a brief moment, he was tempted to rip the frock to shreds.

But instead, he leaned back and gazed down on her rapt visage. It pierced him through, the pleasure on his wife's features. Unlike all the other women he had known, there was something full of wonder on her face.

And he didn't want to cease. Not while he had her here in this moment, not when as soon as she had her divorce, she'd no doubt be gone.

CHAPTER 7

The same townhouse
Four thirty in the afternoon

*H*ow could she have let him kiss her?

The thought thundered in her brain, one great recrimination hammering again and again. She'd fended off many kisses, unwilling to give herself over to sensual passion. She should have pulled away. But she couldn't, not when her entire body demanded it. My God, this was her husband, and he was rough and angry and so powerfully erotic she could do nothing but ride the storm of his mastery.

She should say no. She should. But the kiss was so hypnotic, so incredibly tempting, she couldn't find the strength within her to say no.

Say no?

She *should* scream no at the top of her very lungs but she feared that if she did scream, the only word she would be able to scream would be a resounding *yes!*

Slowly, she opened her eyes and realized he was staring down at her. His gaze was half-closed with desire. "I want you," he whispered. "Without reservations. Once. Just once."

And oh how she wanted him. Her husband. It was such a cruel twist of fate that the man she suddenly desired more than any other man she'd ever met before was the very man who she should hate above all others. He had abandoned her, after all. Yet, her body refused to hate him. She said nothing as she lifted her hand and traced the side of his face, wishing he wasn't so handsome, wishing that he didn't make her feel so utterly alive in his embrace.

He swept her up in his arms and carried her to the striped pink, silk chaise and lowered her so that she sat facing him. Easing her down, he knelt directly before her on the soft rug. His fingers flicked at the hem of her skirt as he held her gaze, his eyes ablaze with dangerous passion.

"I have thought of nothing else since last night," he said, his voice hoarse. "Nothing else but you."

“I am not going to bed you and. . .” Her breath caught in her throat as she stared at him. His words were pure torture to her conflicted soul. It was imperative she remember it was her body he wanted and nothing else. And, in fact, it was only his body she longed for. For she knew him not at all. “I do not believe such drivel, Your Grace.”

“Jack,” he said softly as if she hadn’t just made her position plain. “You must call me Jack. And it is not drivel. It’s the truth.”

Good God, his gaze was powerful, she wanted to tear her own away, but couldn’t. Not when his eyes seemed to speak more volumes about what he would do to her just awakened body than any words could ever do. In fact, his eyes seemed to have a direct connection to her soul and the wild heat spinning within her. “Truth though it may be, calling you by your given name seems. . . unwise.”

“But you must,” he tilted his head slightly, his dark hair brushing his forehead. “Because we *are* going to be intimate. Very, very intimate.”

His hands traced over her slippers then he clasped her ankles, massaging his thumbs over her silk stockings. She gulped. “Are we?” she asked feeling most uncommonly stupefied.

In reply, he tugged her skirts up, sliding them over her knees, pressing them back to her hips, exposing her stockinged legs and her lace undergarments.

Shock and a most alarming anticipation held her frozen. She should move. She really should, and yet her damnable curiosity held her still. Yes. Curiosity should always be explored and she’d often wondered about the mating rituals of. . . She sucked in a shaking gasp as she realized that she was, indeed, going to see what he might do next. His eyes dropped from hers and wandered over her legs.

Instead of taking his leisure, he reached forward, took handfuls of her thin, lacy linen drawers and tore them apart. The sound of fabric ripping mixed with their rough breaths. Cool air caressed her as her most secret place was bared to his eyes. “What are you doing?” she yelped, shocked.

This was a side of him, of any man, that she’d not seen. A wild, demanding part. She’d expected him to touch her legs but not to storm her very gate. And she had absolutely no idea whether she should brain him or perhaps open her thighs a trifle wider.

“Taking what is mine,” he whispered simply, his voice conveyed the notes of hot whiskey and hunger.

She should have hated him for that, but it was not hate that made her ache. It was the painful realization that a secret, foolish part of her had wanted to be consumed by such a powerful man. . . a man who could match her for passion and fire and determination.

With focused intent, he studied her folds, then very carefully, he slid his forefinger over her opening, gathering its slick moisture before he circled it over a part of her anatomy to which she had only ever read about in the most obscure of medical texts.

Her hand flew to her mouth and she bit down on her knuckles to stop a cry of pleasure so intense it was nearly pain. Every inch of her skin tempted her to drop her head back and let him do as he wished to her, but there was something driving her now. Something more than just being the receiver of pleasure.

She wanted him to understand that she was in control of herself, that she couldn't be controlled, not even by a master of sensuality like himself. He could not think her some silly twit to be done with as he pleased. Oh no. She was most definitely one who grasped life by the hands... Though at present what she contemplated grasping was something else entirely.

"And you, Your Grace?" she whispered as he circled his forefinger over her, teasing the little nub with deliciously wicked flicks. "Don't you wish me to. . .?" She leaned forward, her gaze locked with his and stroked her fingers over his smooth breeches, tracing the line of his hip then caressing his groin until her hand slid down and cupped the hard length straining against his clothing.

The heft of it was shocking in her grasp. She knew women took men's shafts into their bodies, yet she still wondered at it. It seemed an impossible happening, given her own small entry and the girth of his member. But given how many men and women frolicked in the gardens of Venus, she had no doubts she would adjust.

If she wished it.

Which, of course, she did not.

No. She'd much rather dig about the sands of Egypt than. . . Cordelia sucked in a calming breath, determined not to lose control of herself or where she'd allow this to lead. Not when so much was at stake.

His eyes fluttered shut as she rubbed her fingers over the long, hardened length. Still, even in his pleasure, he continued to stroke her, clearly savoring their mutual wish to drive the other wild with need.

Terrified by the heights he was pushing her to, she started to pull her hand away and stop this madness but as she did, the door swung open on its

unfortunately well-oiled and silent hinges.

It was so silent, she only caught the motion of the door opening from the corner of her eye and the sight sent her heart throttling against her throat in alarm.

With a yelp of consternation, Cordelia twisted away from Jack, her skirts wrapping about her legs. Simultaneously, Jack vaulted to his full height. In the fumble, the silky fabric of her skirts slipped her off the couch. To her dismay, she landed with a solid thump on the cream and rose Aubusson rug. . . At Jack's feet.

Her knees poked up into the air and her palms slammed flat onto the floor, her mouth open in a silent "o" of shock.

"Sir Geoffry Bellamy and. . ." The old servant gaped, his silvery brows jutting up to his hairline. Apparently, even Smythe, butler extraordinaire, couldn't overlook this particular faux pas.

Mortification rolled through Cordelia as Jack grabbed her forearms and yanked her to her feet. Her skirts tumbled about her ankles in an unorganized fashion and she had the decided impression that her virginal coif had gone morning after coital bliss.

Completely bumble brained, she knew she should probably be adjusting her frock back into place, but she was too lost in the damning realization that she'd been caught in deshabille with her husband by the solicitor protesting for her annulment.

Jack gave her hand a quick and surprisingly reassuring squeeze. "I do beg your pardon gentlemen, but the duchess was suffering a limb spasm and, of course, as her husband it was my duty to. . .ah. . ."

"Assist her?" suggested Sir Bellamy. The older man's cheeks bulged purplish pink over his starched, white collar and his lips were twisted up like crushed rose petals in his shrewd assessment of the situation.

"Exactly," Jack said smoothly. "So glad you understand, Sir Bellamy."

The older man put a hand to his silver-blue cravat and cleared his throat. "Yes, well, these things happen, Your Grace."

Smythe continued to stand rather ineffectually in the doorway, preventing another person from entering.

Said person said brightly, "I say, might I come in? I am here after all in the position of physician. If the young woman needs assistance, certainly I could—"

"No," Jack assured the hidden gentleman hastily.

Cordelia patted her hair, getting ahold of herself and her usual sense of authority. "Do join us Mr.?"

Smythe blinked furiously then stuttered, "S-sir. Michael Dillon, my lady."

"Thank you, Smythe," Cordelia soothed, amazed she was capable of sounding so normal given the outrageous circumstances.

The butler continued to stand there, his eyes flicking from the couch to her then Jack, then back again as his mouth opened and closed.

One would have thought that under Kathryn's employ he would have seen everything, but apparently, even Kate refrained from frolicking with the duke downstairs. "You may go now, Smythe," she said kindly, hoping he would break out of his reverie. "And allow Sir Dillon in."

He gave a small nod, wavering. "Shall I bring tea?"

"I think the brandy will do," Jack supplied dryly.

"It is a bit early," began Sir Bellamy.

"Nonsense," piped Sir Dillon as he inched his way around Smythe, his burgundy coat a decided contrast to the solicitor's grey attire. In fact, Sir Dillon had the air of Falstaff about him, what with his full silver beard, plump belly, and jolly demeanor. "Brandy is just the thing for the nerves and to help Her Grace's limbs relax. . . Given the examination we are to undertake, it is best she remain at ease."

"Examination?" Jack whipped to Cordelia, concern paling his bold features. "What kind of examination?"

"Why to prove virginity, of course," the doctor said merrily as he eyed the tray of brandy. "That is why I am here, am I not?"

"Virginity?" sputtered Jack. His face taking on a blank sort of look as one might have if whacked over the head with a cricket bat.

"Yes, as an added surety to your annulment?" put in Sir Bellamy carefully. His bushy grey brows drew together. "That is what you requested, Your Grace? Are we to understand that his lordship was not aware of this?"

What color was left drained from Jack's face, replacing his concern with a definite hint of gallows. "Would you care to explain, madam?" he asked, his tone deadly quiet. "I thought you were protesting for divorce. For the Devil's sake, how in the hell could *you* possibly ask for an annulment?"

Explain?

That would probably be the best thing, but how on earth did she even begin? She lifted her chin and eyed him determinedly. It would be all too easy to be cowed in this moment, but there was every chance he would be tremendously pleased that they were to be able to have an annulment. They would both be free

a great deal faster without being dragged through the divorce courts and, consequently, the rags.

“You see, our marriage isn’t actually valid what with it being by proxy and. . . and,” she said with a forced air of brightness, but as she tried to continue, the truth, something she usually allayed with no fuss, stuck in her throat. “I’ve never actually. . .” She frowned, wondering why this was so hard to say, given the things she’d just said to him and the fact she never shirked from what needed saying. “That is to say, I’ve never actually had—”

Kathryn stormed into the room, obviously having been standing just outside the door. No doubt accompanied by Smythe. She shook her blonde head and propped a fist on her hip. “For goodness sake dear girl, modesty gets you nowhere as I learned. Just say it. Say you’ve never been to bed with a man.”

Cordelia arched an irked brow at her friend but then said factually, “There. You have it. What Her Grace said.”

She forced a smile to her lips in the hopes that now the truth had been aired, the whole desperate situation would disappear. . . as would her reeling husband.

Jack’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he, too, swallowed back his shock. “You. . . You are a—”

“Virgin,” she reconfirmed, wondering if he had been more shocked to learn she’d never made love to a man or that she was his wife. Perhaps it was the combination of both that had seemed to steal his reason. Handsome though he was, he did appear a candidate for Bedlam what with his stunned look and opening and closing mouth.

He shook his head and, in dramatic fashion, staggered to the tray of liquor and poured himself out a glass. Then as if in second thought, poured out a second glass and handed it to her. “Drink it. We both need it.” He lifted his own and tossed back the contents. “The rest of you can help yourselves,” he rasped as he poured himself seconds.

“Thank you, I will,” Sir Dillon enthused as he swaggered forward to the tray. The doctor was by the tray in a matter of seconds despite his bandy, little legs. His cream colored vest pulled tight against the gold buttons which couldn’t quite restrain his jelly bowl of a middle. Still, despite the calamity, he appeared quite happy to pour out a glass with his pudgy fingers.

Cordelia shuddered as she realized that those sausage fingers were going to be probing at her nether regions and suddenly she found herself wishing that she did, indeed, need a divorce which would not necessitate her giving herself over to the merry, little Father Christmas of a man.

“Shall we have another refreshment, Your Grace, or shall we adjourn upstairs?” inquired the jolly physician.

Cordelia eyed her cognac then lifted it to her lips drinking it down in one burning swallow. “Upstairs,” she coughed.

Anything to get her out of the difficult situation of answering her husband’s questions.

“Yes. Do get on with it,” urged Kate as she swayed forward and poured out a glass for herself and the solicitor. “We shall all be here. Awaiting the verdict.”

A grimace pulled at Cordelia’s lips. “Of course.”

And so she and Sir Dillon went up the stairs to ensure that she was, indeed, as she claimed, untouched. . . or at least, intact.



“She’s a virgin,” Jack found himself saying to no one in particular.

“Indeed she is, Your Grace,” Kathryn said with an irritating note of enjoyment.

He locked his attention upon his friend’s wife. A woman he usually liked. At least when she wasn’t foisting cannon-like information upon his person. “That is not possible. I have seen firsthand that she is not some innocent young woman —”

“I’m sure you have,” she agreed readily, her face alit with amusement. “But did you breach the gate? Can you be sure anyone has? Recall, I turned up on my husband’s doorstep determined to know affection and the world thought me to be an absolutely scandalous woman when I’d never been more than a proper lady.”

He did recall. London had called Kathryn a whore and he and the Duke of Darkwell had known different. Indeed, he’d given his friend good game over his predicament with the young widow. Now, in a similar situation, he was not amused. Was it true? Had she truly kept herself untouched all these years? It shouldn’t matter. It didn’t. For God’s sake. He didn’t expect women to be nuns. And yet. . . It put a different light on her. If she was still untouched, there wasn’t a scheming streak in her body. He was the villain in all this. So it would seem.

He let out a groan. “Kathryn, you could have told me this the moment she arrived in London.”

She nodded. “Yes. I could have.” She gave a wicked grin. “But isn’t this far more fun?”

He gave her a withering stare. He was going to have to have a word with Darkwell about his wife's machinations. But for now, there was nothing to do but wait and find out the official verdict. For until he knew, there was nothing he could do. Hell, even once he knew, he wasn't sure what he could do.

An annulment.

His grandmother would be overjoyed. Anything to keep them out of the papers. But what would Grandmama do when she found out that his wife now in town was perhaps scandalous but also was virginal? It barely bore countenance.

Grandmama would know what to do. If anyone would, she'd know. . . and yet. . . Perhaps this was one ducal matter he should take hold of himself. He loathed the idea of turning Cordelia over to the old gel who would no doubt make minced meat of her in moments. Grandmama had had enough of scandalous duchesses what with his mother's goings on.

"Why did she say divorce?" he asked abruptly.

Kathryn met his gaze. "Because no one would have believed her protestations of innocence. Would you have?"

Jack swallowed his retort. The short of it was that he would not have. Not after her odd behavior and it did not bespeak of his character that he had assumed the worst.

The wait was painful. He imagined the birth of a child was something similar except longer and, of course, with a more joyous result. His future was being decided upstairs at this very moment and it was with a decided sense of trepidation that he faced the footfalls coming back down the stairs.

Sir Dillon entered the room, his face kindly, a smile on his lips. "It is as the lady says. She is intact."

Jack's stomach twisted up and he didn't know if he should crow for joy or rail at the unfairness of it all. He'd made his wife's life Hell. He'd neglected her, leaving her to her devices, and yet she had kept herself untouched so that she could come to London one day, at her own expense, and initiate an end to the marriage he had never bothered to start. "Thank you, Sir Dillon."

Sir Bellamy shifted on the silk chair by the much depleted stock of brandy. He rose to his feet, tottered, then smoothed down his waistcoat. "I shall begin the annulment proceedings immediately."

"Wait," Jack bit out.

"My lord?"

"My grandmother, the dowager, must be consulted in this." He hated that he even had to say it, but if Grandmama was not involved, she would rain Hell

down upon them all. He knew her all too well to think she'd allow such an important matter to go unnoticed. When he'd assumed the dukedom, he made the decision to leave all important matters to his capable grandmother. His father had made it quite clear what a disaster it was that he'd inherited. And he was not about to run the dukedom into the ground as the old man had predicted. No, he'd given all control to his grandmother. At least the old girl would ensure the title was unmarred until the next, appropriate heir could ascend.

Sir Bellamy hesitated. "I understand your situation, but you must see that I am your wife's solicitor and though I have no wish to give offense to the dowager, she has a strong case and should be awarded her freedom with ease. You have been married for many years and have abandoned her and failed to consummate the marriage, my lord. In truth, as Lady Cordelia said, the marriage was never valid to begin with as you were married by proxy as children."

Well. There it was and from a disapproving old trout of a man. "Yes," he agreed with no attempt to defend himself.

"So, you can hardly protest. You've shown no wish to make this a legitimate marriage."

"No. I have not." It was incredible how vacant he felt at this moment, as if this was all happening to someone else. "She would be far better off without me in any case."

"And you will be free to pursue a duchess of your own choosing."

Jack nodded. How did he explain he would never choose a wife, that he would never have children, and that he would always do the worst. It was in his nature, his father had assured him so, time and time again.

So, why should now be any different?

Still, in all technicality, she belonged to him, didn't she? What he was thinking was completely perverse, but it was who he was. If she wanted her freedom, if giving it to her was the right thing to do. . . Shouldn't he do the opposite? His father had fated him for a man who always took the wrong path. Jack hesitated, marveling at the thoughts careening through his head. He glanced up at the ceiling contemplating the woman above. The woman who had nearly burned him to a cinder with her kiss. Could he let her go? Did he have to?

A slow smile quirked his lips. Why on earth should he start walking the path of righteousness now? Oh no, he would walk his path. The wrong path. The path that seduced wives. And it was time to seduce his own.



“He’s gone.”

Cordelia curled up on the barely warm sheets of her mammoth bed and pulled the covers tightly under her chin. How she wished she could go back to a time when she’d been very little and she’d slept on a rickety cot in a tent, her father puttering away at his discoveries, cataloguing away while her mother had sung to herself as she finished sketches of the sites they’d been excavating. A time when things had been simple and all seemed as if everything would always be safe and well.

But simplicity had ceased to be a part of her life when her mother and father had begun to bicker. And then the bickering had escalated to vicious words followed by long stretches of silence.

With every subsequent year, her life had traveled farther and farther from that assurance children feel when protected and unconditionally loved.

She sniffed at her own silliness. She didn’t need unconditional love. She simply needed a good dig site, the men to work it, and her trusty tool kit to brush away the last bits of sand that hid the treasures of the past. Those treasures were reliable. They had been there for several millennia after all. They would never betray her.

“Cordelia?” Kathryn urged.

Cordelia blew out a sigh and rolled over, her chemise twisting about her thighs under the crisp sheets. “Of course, he is gone.”

Kate’s skirts rustled as she made her way to the bed then lowered herself onto the edge. She sat in silence for a while then finally said, “I know we have become acquaintances through letters, but I believe we have become close. I hope you feel you can confide in me if you are dismayed by the day’s events. Are you as well as you seem? Once I would have been reticent, but now, if I were in your situation, I would be tearing my hair out.”

Cordelia nodded, not quite trusting her voice. It was so kind of her friend to offer such comfort, but how could she tell Kathryn that she was not at all well, that she felt sick to her very soul with the way the day had turned, the way all her plans had disintegrated. Where was the proud, audacious woman who planned to dismiss her husband the way one might do to an ineffectual dig foreman?

That woman had been swept up in the Duke of Hunt’s renowned ability to bring any woman to sensual life, and here her traitorous, little heart was beating faster for him. It was a foolish thing and she would ensure it ended here and now.

“This is what you wanted?” Kathryn asked carefully. “The annulment? If so, Sir Bellamy says he shall begin proceedings on the morrow.”

This was exactly what she’d wanted and she shouldn’t be surprised at how swiftly Jack had bolted from the house, but there had been the smallest hope within her that he’d genuinely wanted her, wanted her so badly that perhaps he would stay and discuss this as if she were more than a toy for his personal amusement. But he’d done what he’d done the whole of their marriage. He’d stayed away.

“Yes. Of course it is.” She swallowed a strange knot in her throat. “I shall be most pleased if it can be expedited immediately.”

Kathryn nodded. “I believe Sir Bellamy has every intention of drawing up the papers post haste.”

In a short time she would be free. Free from the man who had thrown her perfectly ordered world into an unacceptable riot of emotion. Yes. That’s what it was. Unacceptable. And the sooner she was rid of him the better.

In one violent motion, she threw the covers back. “What parties have we been invited to this evening?”

Kathryn’s blonde brows drew together. “Pardon?”

Cordelia swung her legs over the side of the bed, dangling them. “I need amusement.”

“But surely—”

“No.” Cordelia wiped a hand over her tired face then pushed herself up. As she crossed to the bell pull to summon a maid for washing, she said over her shoulder, “I cannot stay here and wallow in my own self-pity.”

Kathryn laughed. “Whatever you wish, my dear. And I’m glad to hear it.”

Whatever she wished. If only it were so simple.

CHAPTER 8

The Rapier Club

Six o'clock in the evening

That same day

“*I*’m married,” Jack just managed to say without sinking into the floor.

Charles whipped off his white shirt then, without thought, dropped it. “Must you state the obvious?”

The glowing candlelight tossed from a dozen free standing candelabras cast a glow on his bared skin. He snapped his black gloved fingers, his steely eyes trained on the razor edged blade of his cavalry sword. “Fresh linen,” he ordered.

One of the many servants Charles employed at the Club scampered forward in his red and gold coat, a perfectly pressed linen shirt in his white gloved hands. Which Charles promptly snatched up, swiped over his swarthy face, then dropped onto the highly polished, oak floor.

Apparently owning the most notorious fencing club in London had its benefits. No one *knew* Charles owned it, of course. Gentlemen didn’t actively oversee or own any commercial venture, but those in Charles’ employ certainly were aware of who gave the orders, and well, Charles spent most of his days sweating away on the fencing strip or training areas wielding an exceptionally sharp sword, waiting for some idiot to challenge him. Waiting for it to be late enough in the day to begin getting soused and raising hell.

At present, Charles was dripping with sweat, his rapier in his right hand, and he wasn’t the least bit winded. The Club was more his home than any of the Eversleigh abodes and it reflected his brother’s dark tastes. Red velvet, towering mirrors on every wall, gilt, and black teak. And absolutely no training swords. Only real blades for real men. “You should join me,” Charles urged, his voice a dry rustle from one too many cigars.

Jack eyed the rapier, considering. His brother wielded the thing like it was an extension of his being and given the amount of time he spent with it, really, it was. One would think he was still subduing natives in their homes for King and country. “I think I shall refrain. With you, I prefer pistols.”

Charles rolled his eyes, testing the balance of the sword, spinning it in his palm. It was a pointless, repetitious gesture. He already knew the balance and every nick and scratch quite well. "Pistols are for weaklings," he drawled.

"Pistols get the job done."

Charles snorted.

"Keep your disdain to yourself," Jack said. One might have to worry about a lead ball being lodged in one's person in a duel, something that had never occurred to him. It was his pistol shot that ended up in the other fellow's, usually a husband's, soft tissue. It was true, but one did not have to worry about a limb being severed like a pig's ham hock in the Smithfield markets. That didn't stop him from being more than proficient with a blade, but he didn't have the rabid loyalty to it that his brother did. If the Duke of Darkwell had been available and not lavishing his new wife with every imaginable indulgence, he would have enjoyed a good bout.

"Disdain?" Charles echoed. "I should never engage in such a condescending action with my dear, dear brother."

His twin was in a mood. He'd been in a mood for weeks. In fact, said mood had stolen Jack's usual *savoir faire*, turning him almost. . . God forbid. . . serious.

"I need you to listen now," Jack said slowly but articulately. It always amazed him the way Charles recovered from a previous night's madness. Just the night before, Jack had had to race from his home to their club to talk Charles and his two bottles of empty champagne down off the roof. Now, 'twas as if there was nothing amiss in the entire world.

"I always listen," Charles countered as he stalked back to the fencing strip, took an opening stance and began working an attack pattern. He didn't pause in the delicate work as he added, "When you actually manage to say something worth listening to."

Jack ignored the quip. Last night, he'd let slip that he'd met a fascinating woman. Charles, of course, had had to insist that it meant he was about to swing in the marital noose. How right his brother had been. It was tempting to evade, but Jack drew in a deep breath and decided to launch straight into the predicament which was the mother of all predicaments. "The woman. From last night."

"Was she attractive?" Charles queried as he thrust and held the position.

"Charles," Jack gritted, "we discussed this last night."

That stopped his brother who turned his head just enough to look Jack in the eye. "Did we, indeed?"

Jack scowled and tugged at his cravat, pulling the folds loose until they draped down his shirt front. Standing idly by whilst his brother worked out his demons was adding to his ill mood. Perhaps Charles was correct. Perhaps he needed to join him, even if he might become a walking pincushion. "We did," he said, even managing to sound blithe about it. The blitheness vanished as he recalled, "You even suggested we bed her together."

Charles's face remained unperturbed as he asked plainly, "Did we?"

"No!" Jack thundered then attempted to collect himself by carelessly eyeing the low slung, teak ceiling. The last thing he needed was for Charles to start giving him hell over his ridiculous balls which had somehow managed to take control of his brain.

"Well, I bedded someone," Charles admitted casually. "Several someones I believe."

"You usually do." Jack tugged off his superfine wool coat and green brocade waistcoat, leaving them in a pile by the red velvet wall.

Immediately, the servant scampered forward and began folding. Apparently, it was the poor fellow's lot in life, laundry.

"So do you," Charles pointed out.

Well, he couldn't argue with that. He'd had a merry time sallying from bed to bed, enjoying women, drinking to excess, and avoiding the responsibilities that he would ruin so thoroughly if he dared to take them up.

Jack went to the set of rapiers hanging on the wall and selected another cavalry sword, heavy in weight, but perfect in proportion.

He took the hilt into his hand, the pommel protecting his fingers and headed for what would no doubt be a ball shrinking experience. It didn't matter that few would dare to clash blades with him.

Charles was the best swordsman in London. Some claimed in Europe. He faced his brother, easing down into the balanced squat of a fencer's stance. "You didn't bed her. Nor did we bed her. Just so we are absolutely clear."

Charles saluted him with his sword then took his own stance. "Then you did."

"No." Shifting his weight forward, Jack kept his eyes trained on his brother's eyes. He and his twin had enough of a connection that the eye contact wasn't necessary to anticipate one another's actions, but when pointy blades were in play, he took every precaution.

Charles moved quickly, the blade swinging forward, straight towards Jack's chest. "Occasionally, they prove a good game. You'll find her again."

Jack danced back, his feet light, and his own blade parrying his brother's strike which led to a mad flash of sword blades. As he was forced back, he hissed, "I did find her."

"Good for you," Charles said as he led a series of strikes that had Jack flying back along the dueling strip. "Is that all?"

"No," he ground out as he riposted again and again, barely deflecting the strong blade driven by his brother's enviable skill. "She's my wife," he flung.

Charles faltered in his footing and very nearly skewered himself on Jack's sword. He scrambled back and lowered his own rapier. "Repeat that, if you please?"

Jack dashed his free hand over his sweating brow and the servant scurried forward holding out a linen towel. Jack shook his head at the mouse of a man and even though his face creased in disappointment, the little fellow trotted back to his corner.

"You heard me," Jack breathed roughly. He twirled a wrist, a wry grin twisting his lips. "My duchess is in town."

"Cordelia Eversleigh, nee Basingstoke, has shown her famous face?" Charles pursed his lips in consideration. "Or should I say infamous?"

Jack narrowed his eyes, a knot tightening in his stomach at his brother's ominous declaration. "What exactly are you trying to say?"

Charles threw him a disgusted look. "The rags are full of her escapades and unnatural behavior, though what these moralists view as unnatural these days astounds—"

"Charles," Jack cut in.

"Hmm?" Charles blinked with about as much innocence as Catherine the Great. "Oh yes. Now, you know how much our dear grandmama will delight in our name being run through the mill yet again and on such a scale. I'm sure she's already ordered the evisceration of Snodgrass."

She'd told him she was in the papers. But he didn't read the rags and hadn't realized the extent of the damage. Snodgrass was familiar to him. His name was an ever recurring theme, but Cordelia? "It can't be that scandalous—"

"Scandalous?" Charles strode off the dueling strip, held out his hand, and took the towel from the servant who had already rushed forward. He used it to wipe his blade clean before placing it up on a wall hanging. "Let me simply say

your wife has a certain reputation. A reputation for doing and saying what she pleases with whomever she pleases.”

“I understand she’s unconventional,” he defended her, shocked that he even felt the *need* to defend her. . . Even as he felt a pulsing rage at whatever she might have done with whomever. But she was a virgin and therefore had not done much. Or so he was going to choose to believe. Though it shouldn’t have mattered. He’d never cared about such a thing before. “She was raised in Egypt for God’s sake.”

“Yes,” Charles pointed out, turning to him, his face hard. “And apparently in every sheik’s tent from here to Nubia.”

Fury blazed through him so hard, his throat nearly closed up and his vision blurred. “So, what you imply, what everyone is implying, is that she is an unforgivable whore?”

Charles’ eyes flared in mock horror. “Good God, no. Whore is such an ugly word. I would never call any woman a whore.” He shook his head, drops of sweat flying into the air before he shoved a hand through the slightly too long, black locks. “Let’s just say, your wife must be a true jewel of the free thinking and morally challenged. Just my sort. I should introduce myself.”

“Stay away from her,” Jack ordered so fast his head buzzed with his own voracity.

Charles stopped and gaped, as much as a man of Charles’ dark caliber could gape. “You can’t possibly be serious?”

Jack glared at his brother, intent on making his position clear. “Was I somehow unclear?”

Charles threw back his head and laughed, a dry bark of a sound. “Well, if that’s how you feel, I think I need to remind you of your calling. All women will bed any man who tosses them a bauble, a compliment, and a bit of—”

“She’s a virgin.”

“A. . . A—”

“A virgin,” Jack said slowly, with the first degree of pleasure he’d had in this whole damn conversation. “You remember what that is?”

“Only in the dimmest, most vague remembrance,” Charles conceded, “but you cannot convince me that Cordelia Eversleigh is a virgin. She’s been in the company of more powerful men than the entire Cabinet.” He pinned Jack with cynical eyes. “She’s lying to you and you’ve fallen—”

Jack blew out a frustrated breath, ready to get to the meat of the problem. “She was examined. This morning. I was there.”

Charles cocked his head to the side, a considerable lack of shock on his jaded face. "In truth?"

"In truth." Jack took a few steps forward and replaced his own sword, waiting for his brother to reply to this informative tidbit.

"How fascinating," Charles admitted at last, seeming to mull this over like a difficult philosophical proof.

Jack turned back to him, realizing that his twin might not be the best source of advice, but regardless, his twin was his first line of confession. "Why?"

"She must truly hate you."

"Hardly," Jack scoffed, even if she herself had said something very similar to his face.

She barely knew him and hate required a great deal of energy and then there was the way she had responded to his advances this afternoon. Hate was not in that woman's repertoire.

"No." Charles smiled slightly at the idea evidently dawning within his twisted skull. "Give it thought. She's what, twenty-seven? Twenty-eight?"

Jack gave it a moment's thought. It was odd to realize he didn't know his wife's true age. "She was ten when we were married, or so I recall."

"You were?"

"Thirteen? It's been ten years since she's come of age."

"So you've been married in bliss for fifteen years and she's been of ripe age for almost a decade and she's remained a virgin?" Charles lips parted in an incredulous grin.

"Yes," Jack confirmed grudgingly, wondering where this was heading exactly.

"She's clearly hot-blooded and yet she has retained her *flower*." Charles reached forward and patted Jack on the shoulder. "Now, why would she do that, old man?"

"It's fairly obvious." His mouth tasted of bitter lemons. Discussing his wife's flower with his twin was necessary but highly unpleasant. "The only way she could absolutely ensure the possibility of an eventual separation from me was to retain her virginity."

"Yet you miss the point. You've kept her from living the good life for quite some time. Can you imagine having to remain a virgin all this time? And if you think she'll let you pluck her rose?" Charles' face twisted with amusement. "I hardly think so. She won't give up all her years of abstinence for a fling. Not when her freedom is nigh."

Jack fought a scowl. He was a great believer in logic and his brother's was damned annoying. "I want her."

"If you want her, you needn't have bothered me." Charles leaned forward and clasped him on the shoulders, his fingers digging in with directness and the need to be absolutely clear. He narrowed his eyes. "Have her, get her with child, and when you're bored, send her to the country..."

Charles dropped his hands down and brushed them on his trousers as if brushing himself free of the entire situation. "Though I wonder what Grandmama has to say about all this. You know the old gel will have something to say. Something that will rip your guts out and make you quiver with her verbal power."

He wondered. Cordelia very well might be a match for his grandmother and he damn well didn't want them meeting. "I want her but don't want—"

"The responsibilities of being a husband?" Charles cut in. "Like I said, have her, then send her wherever you want if the country isn't far enough, with enough pocket money to keep her out of your way. And then. . . If she wants a divorce, give her one. Or let the annulment go through. Don't contest and you can still have her. I really don't see a dilemma."

Charles strode to the door and paused. "Now, come with me, and let's see what there is to be seen. This fascination you have for your wife is quite disturbing."

"Wife." Charles shuddered. "What an abhorrent word. Let's not use it again. Shall we just call her your mistress for the present? As in Mistress Eversleigh?"

And then he walked down the hall, his footsteps thudding away.

Jack didn't hesitate or collect his clothes. Charles kept enough garments here to last if all the tailors in London and Paris should suddenly expire.

Charles was right. There wasn't a dilemma. Any way he looked at it, he could seduce Cordelia. If he wished to. Now, there. . . There was the dilemma. For in seducing Cordelia, he had a suspicion he might be in over his head. And that? That was a chance he wasn't sure he could take.

CHAPTER 9

Lady Tallaght's Soiree
Eleven o'clock in the evening
Regent's Park

"*My* God these people are so. . . so. . ." Cordelia struggled to find the words that could express how insanely boring the group of ladies and gentlemen waiting to be announced just were. "It's as if they are bread pudding blanketed in a hearty sampling of bland custard."

"Welcome to London, my dear," sighed Kathryn.

"But London is supposed to be the capital, the beacon of culture and light and. . ." she stopped lest she list any more adjectives. Instead, she arranged the folds of her gold brocade gown which happened to be as heavy as an elephant but was absolutely stunning what with its fringe and embossed, crystal flowers.

It had only just been completed and sent to the house this afternoon. It was perhaps the most extravagant thing she had ever seen. Well, unless, you considered a mummified arm complete with an extravagant cuff.

Kathryn snapped her sea green feather fan shut and patted it lightly against Cordelia's shoulder as they stood very near the front of the line to be presented into the already buzzing ballroom. "Dear girl, if you wish culture and wit you must visit an entirely different set. The Demi-mondaine. Those are the best of London's wits. This?" She flicked her fan towards the sea of inbred British, their sheep faces bored in the candlelight. "This is the *ton*. Anything that was interesting in them was bred out a century ago. I'm only so intriguing because my grandfather married an actress and brought a bit of fresh blood in." Kathryn's face softened. "And even I didn't have a title to my family when I married my darling duke."

"Then why are we here?" Cordy hissed *sotto voce*, lifting her skirts with her gloved fingertips as she ascended another long, gilded stairway leading up to the archway that framed one as they entered the ball.

Kathryn tsked gently. "Don't you remember? You didn't wish to stay at home. And while I could take you to a far more scandalous party, given your desire for an annulment, that seemed an unwise proposition."

Cordelia harrumphed, wondering at her own wisdom. “Ah. Yes.” Perhaps she should have just stayed at home, played cards and drank brandy. Yes, a bottle of brandy would have done her wonders. . . At least for a few hours.

A mischievous grin tilted Kathryn’s lips. “Sometimes these events do have a way of becoming quite fun.”

“Oh?” Cordelia queried. It was fascinating in an anthropological sort of way watching the *ton* in their mating dance, yet she wouldn’t describe standing in a crowded room with the undereducated and overly privileged as *quite fun*. “Why is that?”

“Because. . . You are about to be introduced as The Duchess of Hunt.”

Just as they reached the top step and Cordelia found herself in a towering doorway overlooking the massive ballroom full to the brim with the *ton*, a loud, booming voice announced, “*The Duchess of Darkwell and The Duchess of Hunt.*”

As one, the bustling crowd stopped their chatter and swung their collective gaze to Cordelia. All conversation died down to absolutely nothing and even someone in the orchestra managed to hit a strident note in the Viennese waltz, filling the air with less than sugary tones.

The heat of the bodies rushed towards her as did the scent of at least two hundred different perfumes. This was nothing compared to the looks of disbelief, consternation, and outright confusion being thrown in her direction.

Suddenly, Cordy felt she would have rather faced a bevy of tomb robbers armed to the teeth. And yet, she was here by her choice alone.

“Keep your chin up and be yourself. They’ll be at your feet,” Kathryn whispered through a bright smile.

Cordelia forced a matching, bold smile to her lips even as she considered running in Cinderella fashion for her carriage. Why in God’s name hadn’t she given more thought to the fact her reputation was on the verge of black and even if she had been the picture of English wifedom, her sudden appearance as a long forgotten duchess would have caused quite a stir.

Cordy lifted her chin. She’d face these harridans and curmudgeons head on. Just as she done in Paris, Naples, and Budapest.

The crowd parted like a veritable Red Sea of feathered, silk draped, and powdered waves. It parted until one woman stood at the end of the separated *ton*, nothing but polished oak floor between them. A woman with a presence so remarkable even Cordelia felt her innards quake. The older woman stood, regal and powerful with her white hair in beautiful waves about her remarkable

smooth face, given her seemingly many years. Perfect brows arched over silver eyes and her mouth was pursed in a line of disdain. She grasped an ivory-headed walking stick and was gowned entirely in black. Only a diamond tiara sparkled against her intimidating form. She looked as if she ruled every person in the ball and given the way everyone had stepped back for her, she did.

Cordelia's heart pounded not with appreciation for her power but with the growing realization that she bore a striking, though very female, resemblance to her husband, the duke. It couldn't be his mother. . . Oh no. . . This had to be the Dowager Duchess of Hunt. The dowager of legend who ruled the *ton* with an iron fist.

The old harridan strode forward, her face so full of hauteur, it barely seemed possible that all that power exuded from one woman. Surprisingly tall, the dowager glared down at her with eyes as unyielding as the winter Atlantic sea. Without giving precedence to the two present Duchesses, she spoke first, "Kathryn, introduce me."

Kathryn's lips twitched with barely contained amusement, apparently undaunted by the older woman. "Your Grace, may I present you to Cordelia, The Duchess of Hunt."

Cordelia sank into a curtsy, suddenly concerned she might just keep sinking down through the floor until she was buried at least six feet beneath the townhome, for certainly the dowager's eyes could kill.

"My dear duchess," the dowager drawled. "How interesting to meet you at last."

Cordelia rose from her curtsy and managed her most winning smile, one that had just enough edge to convince the recipient she was no fool. "Yes, it is a shame that circumstances have prevented my establishment in London sooner."

The dowager leaned on her cane. "Yes. It was thought it best you remain with your family until. . ."

"Until your grandson cared to collect me?"

The entire crowd was leaning in, straining to hear them.

The dowager's lips quirked ever so slightly, as if she were trying to suppress a sudden grin. She coughed then pointed to the hall with her cane. "Shall we converse over a glass of punch?"

What else could she do but acquiesce? Making outright enemies with such a powerful woman would be a mistake. And so, she followed the dowager away from the probing gazes of the *ton* and into the slightly shadowed hall.

Taking the lead, the dowager remained silent until she stepped out onto a balcony. It occurred to Cordelia that she didn't have to follow, but she was far too curious to see what the bastion of London society had to say.

Large, gold torches had been placed all along the limestone stairs which led down into the dark garden. A chill in the air gave promise to the coming fall. Cordelia resisted the urge to hug herself. She'd never get used to the damp. But she wasn't about to let the dowager think she was a weakling.

Truly, Cordelia wanted to loathe the old woman, but infuriatingly she found she couldn't. There was something about her. The woman had no doubt fought tooth and nail to achieve her position of power, and whilst Cordy didn't have the greatest of respect for the nobility, she did admire ladies who didn't faint at a bit of battle.

It was on the tip of Cordelia's tongue to demand how she could have condoned Jack's complete neglect of her or at least his inability to set her free. "I wish you had arranged to meet me some years ago," she said instead.

The dowager pursed her lips, a calculating glint to her gaze. "For years, I was relieved you were in some far off backwater. I never forgave my son for gambling Jack's life away and to a Basingstoke. Your family is notorious for stepping out of line."

She tripped slightly on the granite stones, but the old girl slipped her hand into the crook of Cordelia's arm.

It was a gesture that Cordelia had no idea what to make of. "That was rather insulting, Your Grace. My family isn't exactly ditch water."

The dowager stared for a moment then laughed, a slightly dry but delightful sound. "You astonish me. You're nothing like your mother."

That stopped Cordelia. "You knew her?"

"Oh yes. Beautiful. Intelligent. She had everything but she acted like an Italian what with all her passion. I was always stunned your studious father withstood ten years with her let alone ten days."

It was so odd, hearing this perfect stranger describe her parents in such a frighteningly accurate way. Her parents had loved each other, but two more different people there couldn't have been. "So, you were expecting someone like her?"

"Harrumph." The dowager thumped her cane. "The scandal sheets certainly do you no service. They make you sound as scandalous as she, but now I wonder. . . You seem a prickly piece for dancing from bed to bed." The older woman sighed. "You don't do you. You're just a bit odd."

“Odd,” Cordelia echoed.

“Yes. Don’t do things the way these sheep think they should be done. You take charge, meet men on their own terms. Men who don’t understand that kind of woman will insist she’s a succubus.”

Cordelia blinked. Where was the loathing that Gemma had insisted was present? “Your Grace, I was led to believe you found me quite wanting.”

The dowager drew in a deep breath then pulled her hand back and placed it on her cane, leaning a good bit of her weight on the sturdy stick. “There is much against you. Frankly, when I heard you’d come to town, I’d every intention of giving you the cut direct and sending you packing, but I did a little investigating of my own and my man brought back enough facts from your *exploits* to leave me with the impression that you are a most capable woman. . . And therefore, just the thing for my grandson. You will make an excellent Hunt Duchess. . . With my guidance, of course.”

Cordelia felt a wave of sudden longing. Longing to belong. And by God, the Dowager Duchess of Hunt could see she belonged. But no. “Your Grace, I’m here for an annulment.”

The dowager sniffed. “I know. What a preposterous idea. How could you possibly not wish to be a duchess?”

Cordelia’s lips twitched. “I admit it is most unusual. But I’d far prefer to dig about the dirt uncovering the past.”

“My dear girl, there is enough dirt in England for several lifetimes. You cannot be serious.”

“I am,” Cordy said firmly, refusing to give fresh life to a growing fantasy that her husband had actually wanted her for his wife. A true marriage. The kind she’d read about in foolish tales. “I was examined this morning. And the papers are to be submitted.”

“Examined?”

Cordelia drew in a fortifying breath wondering how the dowager duchess would receive such news. “I was confirmed a virgin this morning by Sir Dillon.”

“A court physician?” the dowager duchess echoed, her bold features relaxing for a single moment into astonishment. “A *virgin*?”

She bit back a grin and said soberly, “Yes.”

The dowager was silent for several moments, her face unreadable before she said simply yet unquestionably, “You will come home with me this evening and your things shall be sent for in the morning. You are an Eversleigh after all and I shall vouchsafe your honor if you insist on this annulment nonsense.”

“Will you be my jailor, Your Grace?”

She let out a deep laugh. “Why ever would you say such a thing? I am a reasonable old woman.”

Reasonable? Reasonable as mad, old King Lear.

“Now, you can continue to stay with Kathryn, but if you stay with me, it will go much further in keeping you out of the papers. Staying with your family cannot be seen as scandalous. Staying with Kathryn? It will only flame the gossip.”

Was this absolute madness? But she could see the dowager’s point. The less scandal about her, the faster she could have her annulment and the more seriously she would be taken when raising funds for her work. It wasn’t ideal, but perhaps it was best. “I will agree to this because I wish my annulment expedited and I assume, with your assistance, that will be the case.”

“If that’s what you truly wish, but I reserve the right to attempt to persuade you. Too many years have been wasted and Jack. . .” her face softened. “Jack cannot depend on me forever. He will need a strong woman to be his duchess.”

The genuine tenderness in the older woman’s voice stunned Cordy. Perhaps the old harridan really did have a few feeling bones in her body. And so, she couldn’t resist asking “Did you ever consider that this situation was your fault.”

Her brows rose. “My fault?”

“If you had sent for me when my father died—

“I was not the duke when your father died, Cordelia. And the one person with more power than me was my son. He didn’t wish you here and there was nothing I could do to either divert the marriage or ensure your safety. If you suffered, for that I am sorry. But if you wish to rail against the previous duke’s actions, you must take it up against him.”

“But he is dead,” Cordy exclaimed with an uncommon measure of exasperation.

“That doesn’t stop me. Now, let us go.” With that, the dowager duchess, paraded her out through the back halls of the Tallaght townhouse and out to her waiting footman.

“I need to see, Kathryn,” Cordelia said.

“All right, you may do so,” agreed the dowager duchess. “But I am expecting you at my carriage within a quarter of an hour. If I’m to assist you, I will do so immediately.”

Cordelia gave a tight nod and started back towards the ball.

“Your Grace,” the dowager duchess called, her voice deeper than before, “do not think to change your mind. I could make you regret it.” With that the older woman turned and strode off towards the foyer with a remarkable dexterity given her cane.

The wind whipped slightly, a damp edge to the night air. Cordelia glanced to Her Grace and couldn’t help but wonder if she simply should have stayed in Egypt forever. A married woman, true, but at least then she never would have been crossed by an Eversleigh.

CHAPTER 10

Lord Charles Eversleigh's townhouse

The next day

One o'clock in the afternoon

Or thereabouts

Jack squinted against the dawn light piercing through black brocade curtains then oh-so-carefully lifted his head from the green silk chaise lounge across from his brother's towering explosion of a bed.

He immediately regretted the action.

Charles had promised to prove a distraction for the evening and he had most definitely succeeded.

Gambling with the Chinese for half the night, drinking, and listening to the most ear splitting, quarter tonal music had left him near eardrumless and, probably, brainless. And that was before they'd slummed their way down to the docks to drink with a few sailors and a fair share of buxom and brash doxies.

The bed before his gaze moved and Jack blinked, convinced that he was still drunk. A usually pleasant sensation. But nothing had been terribly pleasant since his wife had come to town.

Then he realized it was the forest green bedclothes which were moving and not the mahogany four-poster decked out with gold silk hangings and long, peacock feathers. The peacock feathers had come from a fan he'd pilfered from a dancer two years ago. A night he'd never live down. Charles had hung them as a challenge to himself apparently. No debauchery was ever too. . . well. . . debauched.

A blonde head popped out from the bottom of the bed and then a slender arm dangled over the edge. Moments later, a red head joined the blonde one. . . and then a black-haired girl, their long locks sliding and tumbling as they slid around at the bottom of the bed. The covers rolled and shook like a shining sea of fabric over their bodies.

Jack propped himself up on an arm and wondered in an Aquinas fashion, not how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, but rather how many women could fit in his brother's bed.

It always struck him as fascinating the difference between himself and his twin when it came to women.

He bedded women for the pleasure but also a specific end, the continual proof to himself that women were fickle creatures and traps he would never fall into. His brother, on the other hand, reveled in them and seemed to love each woman he met in his own way, even if he did send them all off with a light kiss and a handful of extra flash.

The giggles began as they always did when more than one female congregated. Soon four women were sitting upright quite unashamedly baring four different sets of bosoms ranging from voluptuously large to delicately pert.

It was a lovely sight. Usually, he would have strode forward and taken part. . . Ironically, he found himself thinking instead on his wife's breasts and what category they might fall in to, delicate or voluptuous. . . Something most likely in-between. From what he could tell, her breasts seemed perfect. Certainly more perfect than any of these ladies of the night.

This line of thought terrified him and simultaneously made him wish to jump up and vacate the room to find said wife and spend time with *her* bosom.

Charles slowly pushed himself up at the top of the bed and sat himself against the carved headboard in a sort of wrecked ease. A dissipated sultan who leaned over to the side of his bed and pulled a long, black cigar from a silver box, lit it with a match and reclined, his eyes half-lidded and his mouth a smirking line. He drew in a long puff then as he exhaled, he said, "Jack, how could you leave all these ladies' pleasure up to me?" He reached out and casually stroked the blonde's arm, his fingers tracing small circular patterns along the pale flesh. "You quite abandoned me on the field of battle."

A general murmur of disagreement came from the girls and they began to wriggle towards Charles to show him that in no way had he proven himself unequal to the task. He held up a hand, keeping them at their distance. "My dears, I thank you for your company, but alas, all good things must end."

He crooked his finger towards the blonde who crawled forward. Taking her chin between his thumb and forefinger, he gave her a soft kiss. "Thank you, darling." And then he gestured for her to get off the bed.

Which of course she did in a rather dreamy state, a loopy smile on her lips as she wobbled off and a few moments and parting kisses later, the other women joined her. A veritable parade of naked, well-pleased women.

They all pattered out into the hall, their clothes in various states about their body. Charles was an odd sort who treated ladies like whores, and whores like

ladies and sometimes let the lines bleed to a point where it was impossible to tell who was a lady and who was a whore.

But it could never be said that Charles was cruel to women. He liked them too much to send them packing with a terse nod, no cab fare, and an empty stomach.

If he knew his brother, there was a feast of fantastic proportions waiting for the women of questionable origins downstairs, and the servants would treat them all as if they were the daughters of princes, no matter how they behaved or what hideous accent came out of their otherwise skilled mouths.

It was something to be admired in his otherwise unstable brother. For years, he'd attempted to live with the same sort of wild abandon as his twin, succeeding most of the time. But he'd never quite been able to escape his father's ever looming declaration that he was a horrific disappointment.

Charles hauled himself off the bed and swung on a black velvet dressing gown, puffing on his cigar. "So, why didn't you join in the fun?"

Jack avoided the question for as long as possible but knew total avoidance was impossible with his twin. He shoved a hand through his hair. "I- I'm not entirely certain."

"I am."

"Bravo. That makes one of us."

Charles stalked across the room, picked up a half-empty bottle of brandy that had found its way to the floor in the previous night's adventures, then lowered himself into the leather, brass studded chair beside the green chaise. He took a swallow of the dusky liquid then offered the open bottle.

Jack shook his head, tempted to try to cure his headache with what had given it, but even he wasn't quite ready to wake up to brandy. The world had not come to an end just yet.

Charles shrugged and cradled the bottle on his lap like it was his beloved child, as he sat relaxed, confident and completely unapologetic for his behavior.

Jack sighed and shoved himself up to a sitting position, wishing the throbbing in his head would fade. "What is your diagnosis then?"

Charles arched a black brow, eyeing him up and down with a surprising measure of derision. He pointed a finger at him, the smoke from his cigar whirling like a Devil's tail. "You are in her thrall," he accused.

Jack thought about that absurd idea for a moment and tried to formulate a reply. He failed, supplying instead a pathetic, "Pardon?" instead.

“Thrall,” Charles repeated slowly and a little too loudly as if that would somehow make him understand. “As in she holds you in her power.”

Jack scowled then shook his head. And then wished he hadn’t as his brain rattled around within his skull. “I don’t think so.”

“Then why didn’t you come to one of those lovely young women’s dire assistance last evening?”

“Because group frolics have lost their appeal.”

Charles snorted. “Group *frolics* never lose their appeal. One simply refrains because they have allied themselves to a single individual which is otherwise known as monogamy.” Charles shuddered. “Monogamy,” he said again. . . and then shuddered once more before he took a very long draw on his cigar.

“I’ve known her for forty-eight hours. I hardly think she has such power over me.”

Charles just smiled his half-mocking smile and propped his head up with his free hand. “She’s your wife, you want her and she wants everyone else but you. You don’t see the irony in that? Or should I say appeal?”

Cordy couldn’t possibly want everyone else besides him. She’d certainly wanted him when they first met. How could he help it that as her nefarious husband, she was fated to hate him right down to his innards? “What the bugging hell is the appeal?” he demanded.

“It is the ultimate challenge, brother.” Charles leaned forward, propping his elbows on his knees. “To get her in your bed? A woman, so fascinating, so desired and yet so unattainable. Of course you’re in her thrall.”

Jack let out a long sigh, unwilling to admit that his brother might be right and so circumvented such an admission by asking, “What exactly is it then that you suggest?”

“I told you yesterday, or weren’t you listening?”

Jack ground his teeth together, thinking that if he punched his brother there wasn’t a soul in London who would blame him. “I’m not convinced of the merits of such advice.”

“Fine then. I shall offer it once more, slowly, and then it’s your choice to have restricted balls or not.” Charles tilted his head to the side and explained carefully, “She’s yours. Seduce her, and then annul her, divorce her, whatever tickles your twisted fancy. . . Just ensure that you give her her freedom.” He paused then declared, “You’ll both be happy. Where’s the harm in that?”

“Happy?” he echoed then dropped his head back against the green chaise lounge. “I worry at your definition of happiness, Charles.”

“Happiness, satiation, does it truly matter?”

It should. But he’d long given up the idea of any real happiness. To make his way through this world with enough pleasure to make it bearable was all he’d ever really allowed himself to wish for after their brother, Henry, died.

“So, why don’t you just help her get what she’s clearly longed for all these years?”

“And what is that?”

“Why, you, of course. No doubt, she’s been waiting all these year for you to show up and claim her. Don’t you think that’s all she really wants, the ability to call herself your wife with some semblance of pride, and the knowledge she can fornicate wherever she pleases? She’ll have funds, relative freedom, and your blessing to do whatever or whomever she wants. What more could a woman want? She’s only irritated because you haven’t come up to snuff.”

Charles had a point and she had seemed quite angry that he’d never come to collect her. Perhaps, she had a girlish fantasy about marriage to him. It wasn’t truly his fault that the reality was so far from the dream. But he could still give her what she desired, even if it was almost a decade late.

A light knock resounded on the oak paneled door and Charles called, “Come in.”

Benson, Charles implacable and indefatigable butler strode in. “Pardon my lord, but the Duke of Darkwell is insisting he come up. I’ve told him you are not at home, but he insists—”

Footsteps thudded down the hall.

Benson’s shaggy brows bolted up towards his wrinkled forehead in horror. He whipped towards the door on surprisingly agile legs. Just as he reached the door, Darkwell strode in.

“Your Grace!” Benson protested. “You. . . You. . .”

“Thank you, Benson,” Charles sighed. “Darkwell, you better have a damned good excuse for barging in. A few minutes earlier and you would have had quite an eyeful.”

Darkwell rolled his eyes. “Nothing I haven’t seen before. But this is damned serious because Kathryn is put out. And if Kathryn is put out, someone is going to be beaten to a pulp.”

“What the Devil could have disturbed Kathryn,” Jack demanded. “Oh, perhaps my shrew of a wife?”

Darkwell’s dark eyes narrowed.

“Oh God,” Jack groaned. “It is about my wife.”

“And your grandmother,” Darkwell said flatly.

Jack stared at him blankly for a moment then vaulted up off the couch, his head nearly bursting, but he ignored the highly unpleasant sensation which was overpowered by a sudden and distressing protective urge. “Speak plainly.”

“I don’t know what the fates were about making your wife my wife’s friend, but they can’t have been thinking with any sort of benevolence. You see, your grandmother, that tigress, has convinced Cordelia to hie off to your home. I’ve already been there. I wasn’t allowed to see her and you clearly weren’t there.”

“You don’t suppose Grandmama tossed her in the Thames?” Charles asked with a suspicious amount of glee.

“Charles!” Jack snapped.

Charles blinked innocently. “What?”

“Not now.”

“Come,” Charles stated with an air of boredom to his tone. “Not even Grandmama would. . . . Hmmm.”

Jack gave a tight nod. “Exactly.”

Charles sighed dramatically. “Then?”

A slow momentum built within Jack’s usually empty chest. He’d wondered how he was going to capture his own wife. Now, he knew it. “Rescue.”

“How boring.” Charles examined his immaculate nails to emphasize his point.

Jack was tempted to tear off the sheets from his brother’s bed and hang him. He tried a different and, most likely, more productive tactic instead. “It will infuriate Grandmama.”

A thing he actually hated. His grandmother had done a great deal for him, but he couldn’t leave Cordelia to the older woman’s machinations.

Charles narrowed his eyes. “You’re not doing this out of some sort of noblesse oblige?”

“Of course not,” Jack scoffed. Noblesse oblige had nothing to do with the lust and determination to see his wife in a temper. With her beholden to him, that was the only thing a woman of her temper could be. But what a glorious temper, she did have.

Charles bounded to his feet. “Fine then. Let’s be going.”

Darkwell shook his raven-haired head. “You two—”

“Yes?” they interrupted in unison.

“Are the Devil’s own brothers.”

“Indeed we are,” Jack agreed as he strode for the door. Cordelia had waited and waited for him to collect her. Well, he was finally going to come up to the mark. A smile tugged at his lips. At last, life was looking very, very worth living.

CHAPTER II

Cordy had to admire the dowager's efficient skill, even if she did think the old battle axe was, as the Arabs would say, a flea infested pit of a camel married to a donkey's carbuncle. She sat, dressed in a frilly frock, abducted from Gemma's room. The lace itched at her neck and it was all she could do not to rip the stuff off.

All signs of her own promised wardrobe had yet to appear and her predicament was so incredible, even she was having trouble accepting how quickly that seemingly helpful old woman had turned into a mad old bag, locking her in an upstairs room. It was a nice room, but with a lock on it nonetheless.

Apparently, bread and water was on her menu until she saw sense and agreed to be Jack's duchess. Which was all so bizarre considering the facts had led her to believe the Eversleigh family all, except Gemma, wished her as far from England as possible. Darkest Africa had seemed the preference. But now. . . Now? The old harriidan had taken into account Cordelia's skills at leading archaeological expeditions, not to mention her diplomacy with aging and impossible aristocrats, and decided that such a pedigree, along with her blue though somewhat tainted blood, meant she was the perfect woman to inherit the dowager's control of London Town.

Some would have been honored. Cordy wasn't some. She was furious. She'd been held captive before and it was always an exasperating and occasionally terrifying experience. And she highly doubted she'd be able to wheedle the dowager duchess the way she had wheedled the sheik. Her Grace, the dowager duchess of everyone will dance to my tune, seemed wheedle-proof.

A squat, little toad of a woman sat across from Cordy, glaring. Quite belligerently, a single hair protruded out of a mole from her sharply angled, slightly grey, bearded chin. One almost expected the woman's name to be Helga the Horrible.

It wasn't. Her name was Mrs. Alice Rose.

It seemed a cruel twist of fate that such a hideous crone of a woman should have such a delicate name.

Mrs. Rose sat in almost granitelike silence and with a lack of movement that hid a remarkable agility and surprising speed which Cordy had encountered whilst attempting to bolt some five minutes ago.

She had accepted that the older woman was as tough as a Tar Tar and now was contemplating her next best opportunity for escape. It had seemed like a most logical conclusion to take the dowager's offer. One did not deny such power out of hand. But it had been a mistake. A terrible mistake. And she couldn't wait to leave all the positively mad people of London, the Eversleighs the maddest of all.

Escape now seemed a most appealing option. She had not fought for her independence so long to give it up so entirely and without respect in a few short hours. *Her bloody dowager grace* had another think coming if she thought she would take such treatment without retaliation. There were some battles that surely even that tyrannical woman couldn't win.

Cordy eyed her keeper then smiled her winning smile. The smile which had worked on everyone except Jack's dratted grandmother. She hoped that she hadn't lost her touch. Still, needs must be met. "I assure you Mrs. Rose, you are guarding me quite illegally."

The old woman sniffed and folded her old hands together, the gnarled fingers as tough as oak. "Don't matter none."

"That you imprison a fellow female?" Perhaps she could reason with the creature. "After all, we are both women oppressed by society. Should we not unite in the bonds of sisterhood?"

Mrs. Rose looked away, nose in the air. "Say what you will, I shan't be moved."

Cordy scooted to the edge of her seat. "But Mrs. Rose—"

"No, missy."

Missy?

Giving a terse nod, the old woman nodded once. "Her Grace wishes you to stay here until you come to your senses. So, here you shall stay."

"And is Her Grace God, that I should be locked up and judged so?"

The woman gave her such an incredulous shrug that the only possible thing to discern from it was that, yes, the dowager was indeed God Almighty.

It was a most intriguing predicament. She supposed she could overpower the old woman, but it just seemed so unsporting. . . Then again, Mrs. Rose had proven remarkably fast and strong and she might end up being squashed like a bug under the woman's muscly girth.

A loud thud whacked against the window.

Cordelia's gaze jerked to the clear panes, exposing a rather grey morning and the tall, winding limbs of an oak frothing with lime green leaves.

Mrs. Rose also shifted her attention towards the window.

And then, much to her exceedingly disbelieving eyes, in primate fashion, Jack Eversleigh, the Duke of Hunt, most frustratingly handsome and vexing man of the *ton*, popped into view, dangling from one of the oak's impressive limbs. He gave her a grin so impossibly cheeky that a shocked laugh burst from her lips.

Despite her astonishment, Cordy sprang to her feet and darted for the window.

Apparently winded from her earlier pursuit, Mrs. Rose lumbered after her.

Still, that didn't stop Cordelia from throwing the window open and asking with an attempt at seriousness, "Do you have an appointment, sir?"

His dark brows lifted towards his boyishly uncoiffed black hair. "Does one need such a thing to rescue one's wife?"

She nearly tumbled out the window as her heart slammed in her chest. The word wife should have sounded dreadfully wrong. It didn't.

He extended a lightly calloused, granite looking hand. "Come on then," he dared. "Show me the wild Duchess Cordelia."

She quickly peered down at the three stories of open space beneath her, the expanse between the windowsill and the trunk of the tree. Without looking back towards her advancing jailor and her beautifully appointed prison, she grabbed Jack's extended hand.

Mrs. Rose's footsteps thundered across the room. As Jack spotted her, his eyes widened with chagrined horror. In one quick move, he latched his fingers firmly about Cordy's then yanked in a fast, hard jerk. . .

Leaving her dangling from the very strong arm of one mad member of the *ton*. . . above a pristinely groomed lawn wondering if she'd traveled thousands of miles to die skewered upon one of the elephant-shaped shrubberies below. Drawing in a steadying breath, she lifted her eyes to his and ordered, "Swing me over!"

And much to her amazement, he did exactly as she said, swinging her up through the cool air and in towards the ancient tree. She hit the scratchy bark with a hard thud and her breath *oomphed* out of her, but not before she clung to the trunk with her legs and free arm. 'Twas a good thing her thighs were in such

splendid condition, otherwise she never would have been able to grip the large and rigid wood with such dexterity.

A strange look crossed over her husband's face as she squeezed her legs before he shook his head in what could only be declared as wonder.

Even with her suitably fit person, clinging was remarkably difficult sans her sensible clothing. Gemma's borrowed clothes were simply not meant for an aerial escape. Her legs wouldn't part quite far enough to allow her groin to meet the tree. So, she dug her toes into the bark and glanced up at her would-be rescuer. "Make haste. I shan't be able to hold on long."

A definite dose of admiration lit his face. "Unbelievable."

She flashed a grin then said practically, "Thank you. Now let go my hand."

"I hardly think that advisable."

"Jack," she warned, carefully, for she did truly appreciate his assistance in her escape, "let go."

"But—"

Cordy let out a sigh. Men. They were such ninnies.

With one swift move, she pulled her fingers from his, grabbed the tree, then scaled down the bark in quick slides. Her slippers landed on the lawn with a solid thud and she peered up, staring at two faces which were gaping down at her as if she'd grown a second head.

Jack was still far up in the tree, his mouth open.

Mrs. Rose on the other hand fairly shook with fury. She let out an unintelligible curse then whisked away from the window.

"Are you coming down?" Cordelia called.

There was a pause then the reply, "Indeed, madam."

"If you could be quick about it?" She brushed her dirty hands against the fluffy frock and grimaced. "I do believe we are in a trifle hurry."

And just as said words passed her lips, the door to the rear of the house cracked open.

With far less grace than her descent, Jack scrambled down out of the tree, his muscled arms working with beautiful precision. It really was quite miraculous the strength and grace of the male form. . . Jack's body moved with such power that she was sure she could learn a great deal anthropologically speaking from his movements. But just for good measure and so that he wouldn't realize how much she admired him as an ideal specimen of the male species, she commanded, "Get a move on, Your Grace."

He pounced to the earth and his black eyes narrowed as he rose from his crouched position. His hand reached out and engulfed hers. Without a word, he started running across the slightly damp grass towards the street, tugging her along behind him.

Luckily, she'd done her own fair share of running and kept up with him. Even so, her stays (something she was still adjusting too) nearly had her gasping for breath and her constrictive skirts caught on her shoes, threatening a much closer acquaintance with the lawn than her descent from the tree had done.

As they rounded to the cobbled street in front of the townhouse, she spotted a black coach, hitched with four chestnut horses and a driver sitting at the ready.

The front door flew open and shouts filled the air as liveried footmen bounded down the limestone stairs, their white wigs bobbing like fluffed cream.

"Run faster!" Jack shouted.

She attempted to kick out her feet to match his long stride and promptly caught her pointy shoe in a flounce. She flew forward, her limbs completely out of control.

Bracing herself, Cordelia cursed the men who made women's gowns to be so imprisoning, but before her body could collide with the earth a pair of brazenly muscled arms latched around her middle and tossed her up into the air until her stomach landed with quite a distressing *whump* upon an exceptionally broad, male shoulder.

Jack's shoulder.

Though padded with sinew, it still jarred her middle. He made no apologies about his Neanderthal movement. "Down!" she ordered, rapping firmly against his back.

"Never mind your shrillness," he returned.

"I am not shrill," she huffed as best she could, middle thwacking against him. "I am authoritative. Now put me *down*!"

"In a moment."

Her eyes fixed firmly on his rock hard buttocks flexing with each forward thrust of his thighs and she felt herself flush. She rammed a hand against his back. "This bleeding instant!"

"When we're good and away, woman."

Woman? *Woman!*

Just as she was about to deliver a blistering reply, she caught the movement of legs covered in white breeches out of the corner of her eye and realized they were being pursued quite determinedly to the coach. "Faster!" she bellowed.

“I *am* going faster. You weigh a surprising amount.”

And just as she was sure said running breeches were about to reach out and seize her, she sailed through the air and bounced against a cushioned seat.

Jack’s large frame fell against her, landing with a hard and immobilizing crush. She thrashed under him to no avail and she gasped for breath as the coach rushed into motion, rocking both of them in an undignified rhythm which was somehow quite physically provoking. Her already red cheeks burned prodigiously and she felt the most alarming things in the most alarming places. . . Undoubtedly due to the inappropriate placement of his thigh betwixt her legs and his chiseled chest pressed against her own considerably softer one.

At last, as the coach rumbled over the cobblestone, his hard frame eased against hers, and he lifted himself, but only ever so slightly. Only enough to allow her to breath and to make his weight a strangely pleasant sensation.

Pleasant or not, she had no intention of allowing him to linger upon her person. “Are you somehow incapacitated?”

“Only by your glorious body,” he purred.

She snorted. “Glorious, indeed. Remove yourself.”

“In a moment, I’m exhausted.”

She rolled her eyes, though since his face was pressed quite distractingly into the crook of her shoulder, his breath causing the most delicious sensations against her neck, the look was lost on him. “I had no idea you’d such little stamina.”

“It is the shock of having absconded with my own wife.” The warm words caressed against the soft skin of her neck and ear. “Give me a moment and I shall rally.”

His lips were so close she nearly arched towards him, in a bizarre experience of her body attempting to act without regard to her brain.

“History has set a precedent for such happenings and given circumstances,” she gritted, attempting to squirm away from his doubtlessly hypnotizing lips, “you can hardly call me your wife.”

Slowly, he lifted his head and gazed down at her with eyes as hot as the glittering sands of Egypt. “And yet you are.”

Her insides jellied and she glanced away. “Harrumph.”

He tsked. “Show a bit of gratitude.”

Such a ridiculous instruction sent her gaze reeling back towards his. “Whatever for?”

His eyes widened innocently, as innocently as his eyes could ever possibly attempt. “Rescuing you from whatever machinations my grandmother had in store for you.”

She squirmed again under his broad frame, attempting to dislodge him. “I would have rescued myself eventually.”

He remained solidly atop her. “But not until after several days—”

“Hours,” she pointed out quickly. She would not inflame his clearly already engorged ego.

“Days of hideous lecture,” he droned on, no consideration to her correction, “and attempts at reforming your already ideal character.”

That gave her pause. She stopped shifting about beneath him, firstly to stop the strangely, increasingly pleasant feelings such activity was inducing in her rebellious body and out of blatant curiosity. “Ideal?”

“Without doubt.”

She narrowed her eyes, deeply suspicious that any man, let alone such man as he, could find her in any way *ideal*. “How so?”

“You have an independent mind and an adventurous spirit,” he said as though it were the most obvious thing in the entirety of the world.

“Most men do not consider me ideal. They consider me a catastrophe,” she found herself saying with a degree of softness that might make her sound vulnerable so she added acerbically, “Idiots that they are.”

“Yes,” he acceded just as softly but with a highly different intention. Those hot eyes of his were wandering over her face as if he had discovered a highly prized artifact. “Most men would and are.”

“But you are not most men?”

He said nothing, only smiled slightly, a ridiculously charming smile.

“No.” She made every attempt to glare at him, but he was so endearing what with his black hair brushing over his forehead, and that ludicrously admiring expression upon his far too handsome features. “I suppose you are not.”

“And you are not most women.”

“I do believe that goes without saying.” She hesitated, wondering what the Devil was happening here in the coach rattling through London. “Is that why you rescued me from your grandmother?”

“Pardon?” He seemed quite distracted by some aspect of her face.

She ignored his strangely compelling gaze. “Because you think I am unique?”

“No.” He blinked as if shaking his own supercilious thoughts away. “I rescued you, because my grandmother, love her as I do, has a will of iron and whatever she wants, she gets and well, I wouldn’t leave a dog with her that didn’t wish to be.”

“Well, thank you.”

He pulled back from her a little, the weight of his chest lifting away from hers as he propped himself on twin rock hard arms. “I didn’t mean—”

She took the opportunity to scramble away and attempted not to think on how very strange her breasts felt and how they ached at his sudden withdrawal. “I am not interested in what you meant.”

He lifted his hand and carefully brushed one of her errant locks aside. “Are you not?”

“No. And why didn’t you just order her to let me go. You *are* the duke after all. Why the theatrics?”

He looked askance. “I run the ducal estates in name only, you see.”

“I don’t understand,” she said softly.

“I show up to ceremonies, suit on, coronet in place, but I do not have the ability to be a good duke. So, my grandmother agreed to take care of the estates and everything else for me. She ensures that I can’t ruin generations of Hunt rule.”

His words were quick, emotionless and she could hardly believe he meant them. “I hardly think that you seem incapable.”

His eyes hardened. “I am. Leave it at that. My only skills are with women, wine and song. Make no mistake. Any other belief in me would be quite inadvisable.”

A strange sort of sadness tugged at her heart. He had a very dark view of himself. Still, she wasn’t going to be a fool and try to change him. Her parents had constantly tried to change each other and the only thing they’d gained was misery. Besides she was leaving. Yes. Leaving. Cordy cleared her throat. “Will you send my things to whatever dock you are escorting me to? I’ll be glad to see the backside of this dratted country.”

“Whatever for? And why in God’s name should I take you to the docks?”

A strange, suspicious feeling took root in her stomach. “Why, to leave this ridiculous country. You rescued me to help me *escape*!”

All the mischievousness that had been there just moments ago, was fast slipping away. “You are staying.”

The air whooshed out of her but she managed to inquire, “Why is that?”

“Because I wish it,” he replied with the same sort of surety as the sovereign might have declared to his ridiculously unpaid tailors upon the request for a new suit.

“Your whims are most disconcerting.”

“I said that I was a bad duke. I didn’t say I wasn’t a duke at all. What I desire, I usually get. And I don’t wish you to leave. Not yet.”

“But I can now arrange for our annulment abroad,” she pointed out. . . as though he wasn’t already aware. Surely, he couldn’t possibly be serious! “The medical exam is done and, frankly, it was foolish of me to come here. London is the Devil.”

He seemed to listen, but his reply, “You are staying,” suggested he hadn’t heard a word she said.

She narrowed her gaze. “Are you suddenly deaf?”

“No.”

“Then why do you repeat yourself?”

He shrugged and then took a seat beside her in such a luxuriously sprawled position one might have assumed he was a sultan. “You are not leaving England,” he said simply.

She scrambled up into a decidedly flummoxed, half-seated position. “Then what is it that I am doing?”

He stared back at her as if she were mad. “You are coming with me, of course.”

She swallowed, barely daring to believe the horrifying nonsense coming from his beautiful mouth. “That seems hardly advisable.”

“We shall travel north. I know a marvelous hunting lodge,” he enthused, ignoring her.

“I do not think so,” she gritted.

“Though I adore your mousetrap of a mind, thinking is not required of you at present.”

She goggled at him, wondering if she’d left her head behind or if this could truly be befalling her. “Are you mad?” she exclaimed.

“No.”

“Did you bash your head in your rapid descent from that old oak?” Dear God, she hoped so.

“No.” He continued to stare impassively at her, like an unyielding wall.

“Are you drunk?” she asked hopefully.

“Not at present. Would you care for a drink?”

“No!” she yelled, her blood slowly boiling until she was sure she was going to reach out and punch him.

His brows drew together in mock shock at her tone. “Then stop asking silly questions.”

Her eyes narrowed to slits so small she could barely see his infuriating countenance. “I will if you take me to the docks.”

He paused for a long moment, apparently giving her command consideration. “No.”

She flung herself on the seat opposite him, determined to be as far away from him as possible. “You are repeating yourself again.”

He grinned. “Yes.”

“Look here,” she began in what she believed to be a way in which one reasons with such an oaf. “I will not be bullied nor told what to do.”

“Yes, you will.” He folded his arms across his chest, causing muscles she barely even knew existed to move in a most fascinating succession of ways.

“Why do you believe I shall do such a thing?” she demanded, wishing that she had merely peeled off down the street on her own steam rather than waiting for him to crash down from that dratted tree.

“Because I am your husband,” he declared imperiously with such a degree of amusement, that one would have thought he were Lord Wellington himself.

“No,” she growled, fighting the urge to grind her teeth together. “You are not.”

He wagged his finger at her, his eyes alight with a terribly pleased glow. “The law disagrees with you.”

“Only for the moment,” she hissed, knowing full well that she had jumped from the pan to the fire. But who could have possibly thought imprisonment by that demented grandmother would be more reasonable than escape with a husband who had seemed quite unwilling to have a wife?

“The moment is all that matters.”

“Ooooh! You do realize your grandmother will be furious.”

His grin blossomed into a full and ecstatic grin. “I know. Isn’t it marvelous?”

“My God,” she groaned, burying her face in her hands, willing him, the carriage, and, quite frankly, all of London to disappear.

“You don’t believe in God,” he corrected blithely. “Rocks perhaps but—”

“Never mind that now.” Cordy groaned again lest she begin a tirade of swearing. A sense of indignation that she had indeed been kidnapped by her own husband began growing within her.

“What would you like me to *mind*? Hmm. Your mouth? I adore your mouth, even when it is speaking the most contrary of—”

She flung her hands down to her sides and attempted to pin him with a glare so frosty his entire being should have crystalized on the spot. A sudden and infuriating thought came to her. “That’s why you’ve done this!”

He glanced from side to side, his face relaxed and oh so innocent. “Done what?”

“Rescued me, you dolt.”

“There is no need for name calling. It is beneath you, a woman of your intelligence.”

Dread rippled through her. Yes. Dread, because with each passing moment, the truth of his erratic behavior dawned on her. “You’ve rescued me because it will anger your grandmother.”

There was that silence again.

“That’s all this is,” she pushed, waiting for him to deny it, but certain he would not. “An opportunity to prove your lack of worth.”

His joie de vivre simmered to a low boil and his innocent expression petered away. “That is not entirely correct.”

“Then what? Please do elucidate.”

He cleared his throat and leaned forward, bracing his forearms against his muscled thighs. “There is a much larger picture here.”

“Would you care to paint it for me?”

He cocked his head to the side, eyeing her carefully before replying, “No.”

“I will not sit idly—”

“All you need to know is that you are my wife. You will do as I say. And what I say is that you are staying.”

Did the entire Eversleigh clan suddenly wish her to stay in London? It certainly seemed so. How had everything changed so quickly, so horribly, in just a few hours? She was in a carriage with what had to be a madman. Yes. A madman. Mad as his grandmother. And as impetuous as his sister. The entire Eversleigh family was crack-brained. It was the only explanation for her situation. If they were all mad, he was not to be reasoned with.

And that was when she decided screaming, though exceptionally female, was the only answer to this insane circumstance. . . And scream she did.

CHAPTER 12

*A*fter traveling goodness knew how many miles, submitting herself to the probings of a doctor, being entrapped by her grandmother-in-law, and then *rescued* by her husband, Cordelia couldn't believe that she was now the *captive* of said rescuer.

Hadn't she come all this way to be free of him?

This morning, she'd been so certain that it was his grandmother that she had to be wary of, but no. All this time, it had been her husband, who was the one she should have avoided at all costs.

The entire course down the mysterious Nile would not have been far enough to place herself from his company. Not with that gloriously pleased madness in his eyes.

And she, fool that she was, had swung right into his literal grasp, believing he was happy to be rid of her. That he would send her merrily back to Egypt, her work, and freedom.

Freedom? As Gemma would say, *Ha!*

If one could call his cravat stuffed in her mouth freedom. Apparently, her screaming had disagreed with him and, in a display of male dominance and irritatingly superior strength, he had torn off his cravat and tied it about her mouth rendering her silent.

This had not stopped her from attempting to pummel the daylight out of him. . . which had then led to her hands being tied behind her with one of the carriage's curtain ropes.

In her entire life, she'd been in only one such similar predicament and the sand bandit that had absconded with her had been remarkably more gallant. At present, she was fighting back silly tears of indignation.

Tears did one no good after all and they were, no doubt, only the physical manifestation of her depleted reserves. It was her good fortune that about an hour ago, he had fallen asleep. Even she knew she could be quite the handful when she chose to be and he had apparently had enough. . .

It had also helped that she'd played possum. . . a term she had learned from one of Kathryn's scullery maids. Possum did seem to be a rather intelligent

position to take. Apparently, he had been lulled by her eventual submission, no doubt believing his *superior* masculinity had won out.

Night had long since fallen and they had not paused to light the lanterns within the coach. So, she sat in relative darkness eyeing her *husband*.

Bloody marvelous.

She was in the hands of a beautiful madman and she was heading farther and farther away from escape with each turn of the coach wheels.

She chewed lightly on the silk cravat, wishing she had the teeth of a lion. Instead, her teeth meant more for the chewing of vegetables than silk grew tired and she gave up the hope that she might be able to divest herself of her gag in such a fashion.

Still, never one to take things easily, she let her eyes wander over the coach in hopes of finding some aid in escape. After several long, fruitless moments, her eyes fell to the coach door itself. She stared at the handle then swung her gaze to his sleeping form.

He appeared to be as gone from this world as a wrapped mummy, sleeping eternally in seven different coffins. Perhaps. . .

Carefully, she shifted across the seat. The rumbling of the coach masked her movements and, without letting herself think too forwardly about her actions, she leaned down and pressed her chin against the cold, brass handle.

To her utter delight, it snicked open and the door opened a crack. She peered out the window, spying far-flung, rolling fields on her side of the coach. In slow degrees, she lowered herself to her knees on the floor, just barely missing Jack's polished, booted feet.

He made a muffled sound in his sleep and rolled to the right, stuffing his strong arm behind his head.

Her heart leapt up into her throat and she forced herself to draw in a measured breath. She might be about to break her own neck. . . but she was not about to stay with him, handsome or no. No one controlled her fate but herself, certainly not pouncing, arrogant dukes.

The slightly open coach door let in a surprisingly piercing cold draft of air. She braced herself against it before she threw all sensible thoughts aside. Nudging her shoulder against the silk padded door, she pushed until it swung silently open.

Fields passed quickly by as she let her mind go blank then rolled out of the coach.

Her body hit the earth and she gasped. Pain splintered through her bones and, for several searing moments, she was sure she would not be walking away from her impulsive decision. The earth was hard, packed down by the heavy coaches that had rumbled past before. She grimaced against her gag.

In inching movements, she wiggled onto her stomach and drew her knees up under herself. It was quite difficult given her tied hands and after pressing her face into the dirt, she finally managed to pull herself into a kneeling position.

She glanced down the road and could just barely make out the coach hurtling along the rutted way, but there was thankfully no sign of it stopping.

A vengeful laugh rippled up her throat, muffled against Jack's damp cravat. Think he could kidnap her, did he? Clearly, her husband had no idea what sort of woman he was dealing with. With a pleased huff, Cordy stumbled to her feet and faced the road stretching in the opposite direction of her witless captor.

Hmmmm.

The road slipped on and on into the moonlit night with no sign of life. Well, she'd been in worse predicaments.

As she began to stride down the rough road, a certain cooling eroded her determination to persevere. The air was astonishingly frigid. Oh, she knew cold. The deserts could plunge in temperature, yet this cold was something she had never quite experienced. It was damp and Gemma's frock was about as much of a shield from the damp as striding about in one's unmentionables. Though her breath was not visible, her skin prickled and tingled with a less than welcome sense that she was turning into a late summer ice.

Still, she marched on.

Step after step began to send her blood circling through her veins, warming her to a slight degree. Now, the only real question was her location. They could have taken any of the numerous roads from the city. She seemed to be heading in a southeasterly direction, one she hoped would lead her towards some sort of civilization.

The moon wavered overhead, its pallid glow a consolation in the silvery night. The silence of the darkness, on the other hand, was disconcerting and so she began the recitation of the Roman dynasties as best she might.

She'd made it entirely to the emperors after Julius Caesar, a particularly terrifying group of men, when the clapping of a horse's hooves drummed through her recollection.

Her legs froze in mid-stride and her brain was torn immediately between the desire to launch her physical form into the ditch and the need to make contact

with someone who might untie her unfortunate wrists.

Since indecision was not one of her general weaknesses, she came to the immediate conclusion that the freedom of her hands was essential as was the freeing of her mouth from the irksome cravat. Perhaps it was foolish, but she refused to go another step trussed up like a Christmas goose.

So, she stood her ground on the lonely road awaiting her veritable fate.

In fact, her expectations had been for a farmer passing by. The horse thundering out of the darkness was anything but a glue pot. It stood a good seventeen hands, its muscles evident under its silken, russet coat, and its rider—

Cordelia blinked. . . Then blinked again. Clearly, she, like her husband, had gone mad.

She mumbled against her gag, swayed a bit and then in a most embarrassing moment, she did something exceptionally unfortunate, given her tied hands.

Cordelia Eversleigh, nee Basingstoke, archaeologist and adventurer extraordinaire, fainted.



She was not certain if it had been moments or hours, but given that she was laying upon unforgiving dirt she quickly deduced her brief departure from this world had only been a short one. Still, she appreciated the moments away for certainly they had restored her reason. Even so, she was hesitant to open her eyes, lest she find that she had, indeed, gone mad.

“Madam?” a dark voice intoned. . . A suspiciously familiar voice.

She groaned inwardly. Yes. Indeed. She had cracked. It was most disappointing for she had always considered herself to have a resolute character undaunted in the face of adversity.

A strong finger poked at her arm. “Madam?”

“Mmmmrphf,” she grumbled into her gag and the dirt, for as she opened her eyes, she realized the blasted idiot had left her face down.

“I do beg your pardon,” he began as he turned her onto her back.

She grimaced at the pain of her shoulders wrenching against her bonds.

Glaring up at her potential rescuer, she began to curse. . . ineffectually. “Uuuu. . . Bassshhhrrdddd. Fmmmm. Unnnnghtyyyyy mfffff.”

He gaped down at her, his face masked by the night.

“Unnnnnnghtyyyyyyyyy mffffff!” she tried again, hoping he would overcome his shock to do the gentlemanly thing.

A deep, rough laugh boomed through the night.

He was laughing at her. *Laughing*. A growl of fury twisted up from her throat and she attempted to lash out at him with her foot.

“My apologies,” he sniggered.

“Hmmmph!!”

“A moment. A moment.” And then he leaned down and Cordelia fell silent.

Yes. There it was. Proof that she was mad.

Her husband stared down at her with a fresh expression of amusement at her expense. There was something slightly sinister about his appearance in the dark and she could have sworn he’d been wearing a white linen shirt not a black silk one, but her mind seemed to have trotted off.

He peered down at her as if he had never seen her in his life, a rather cruel and interesting ruse. Still, he reached around the back of her head and yanked the cravat free.

She stared at him, waiting for him to say something, anything really. Surely, he was displeased at her escape? Instead, he was gazing down at her as if the heavens had suddenly blessed him with some unholy present.

“You’re not particularly pretty,” he observed.

She arched a brow and pursed her abused lips. “Prettiness is overrated as any sort of accomplishment...”

“You’re quite nicely formed,” he continued, as if he hadn’t heard her. “An attribute which, in the end, is far more desirable than an admirable face.”

Yes, he was her husband. . . even if he was acting most bizarrely.

Slowly, her husband brushed his black gloved fingers over her cheek and then down her neck. They trailed lightly, teasing over her chilled skin, edging along the neckline of her lacy bodice.

She kept waiting for her body to burst into treacherous fire as it always did at his touch. Yet, nothing happened. A feeling of sheer delight stole through her. At last, her mind had conquered her body. It was such a relief that she longed to jump up and do a whirling dervish. . . Alas, her hands were still tied behind her. “You, sir, are an ass.”

“How can you say that to your savior?” he quipped, his face a mask of amusement and that amusement took precedence over her discomfort.

She attempted to shift away from his gloved hand doing its dance very nearly upon her bosom, yet the pain in her shoulders made undue movement impossible. “I should rather be kicked in the head by a mule than risk your kind of saving.”

“Come now, I’m not that bad.” He smiled ever so slightly, a smile that was full of darkness rather than humor. “Most women adore me.”

She turned her head away from him, her only immediate means of protest. “I thought we had established that I am not most women.”

He paused in his bold stroking of her neck and breastbone. “Do forgive me, have we met?”

“Oh, for Heaven’s sake. It is I who most likely hit my head as I left your coach, not you.” She whipped her head back towards him, intent on making her irritation plain. “Do not act the fool with me.”

He cocked his head to the side, his hair perfectly groomed away from his face. “My coach?”

Wasn’t his hair all boyishly mussed? Or at least it had been “Yes. . .”

His face paled and he rolled his eyes up to the heavens in dramatic supplication.

Cordy lifted her head from the ground trying to get a better look at his pained expression. “I say, are you quite all right?”

He whispered something inaudible then ran his eyes over her face again with far less passionate interest then groaned, “Cordelia, Duchess of Hunt, I presume?”

She snorted. “Don’t be an idiot.”

He brushed his gloves together, as if brushing her from him and allowed himself to plunk back onto the hard ground as if sitting in the middle of the road was the most common occurrence for a peer. “I concur, my brother is a fool, but you must not abase me in the same fashion.”

She twisted, her frock catching under her hips as she gaped. “Y-your—”

“Brother.”

“Yes, thank you. I was about to say that.”

He shrugged elegantly. “You seemed to be stuttering.”

A groan of her own grumbled past her lips. “It has been an eventful night.”

“So, I gathered from Grandmama.”

“The dowager?” she panted, all this wiggling about on the ground finally taking a toll.

“Mmmmm.” Her...dare she say it, brother-in-law...adjusted his hat so it sat back from his face. “I do believe all of London heard her rantings. She is not used to people going against her dictates.” He leaned back slightly. “I never expected to run into you on the road. It’s rather opportune though.”

“I don’t follow.”

He stared at her for several long moments as if attempting to see deep within her and then, after apparent failure in his quest, he scowled. "Jack seems to have some sort of fascination with you."

Her mouth opened then closed with undignified astonishment. "You do realize I am still tied up and lying upon the cold ground."

"It had occurred to me, yes."

"And?" Her voice was a touch overbearing and she gulped back her desire to bellow at him.

"I suppose you should like me to untie you."

"Yes. That would be pleasant, thank you."

"But you see," he leaned forward, those black eyes of his, so similar to her husband's, wandered over her face, found nothing there and descended in a most impertinent fashion to her breasts and hips. "I should like to discover what it is about you that would cause my brother to act in such an odd fashion. He doesn't usually take such interest in women."

"Are you saying he prefers men?"

"Good God no," he burst out quickly. "Not that some of the men in my family—" He cut himself off and his brows furrowed slightly, whether in disdain or curiosity it was hard to measure. "What a mind you do have. I'm shocked you even know anything about such goings on. You see, my brother and I usually enjoy women, sometimes even the same one at the same time, but more as one might enjoy a nice piece of linen which after one uses—"

"One discards?" she said, disheartened. It didn't surprise her. Of course, it didn't. She knew his reputation and the temperament of most men in general. Men would never hold equal to women in terms of admirable qualities, yet she found herself deeply disappointed that even his brother held such a confirmation of Jack's dissipation.

"Yes, exactly. How astute for a woman you are."

"Thank you," she drawled.

"I'm glad you can appreciate the delicacy of the situation."

"I'd appreciate it more if my hands were untied."

"Learning to live with disappointment is the most important key to happiness."

"And have you achieved such blessed happiness?"

"Ah. No. But then again, it is a far more suitable trait for females than men."

"Of course." And with that she knew she had no other recourse than to put the blighter in his place. As swiftly as she was able, she drew her knee up,

blasting it into the side of his face.

Whether by shock or force, he twisted to the right, landing beside her. Without hesitating, she vaulted up and threw her leg over his middle, a compromising but necessary position. She leaned back and with her tied hands grabbed his most important asset. . . Unpleasant as it was she gripped his shaft until a rather un-masculine sound whistled out of his lips.

“Untie me,” she demanded coolly.

“Release me,” he countered, his voice considerably higher than a moment before.

“No.”

“I begin to understand my brother’s perplexity,” he rasped. “I should just throttle you.”

“You can, of course, try, but I have a good hold upon your nether regions, and if you were to attack me, I promise I shall take your manhood with me.”

He panted slightly and, for a moment, she was horrified by the possibility that he might be enjoying this so she squeezed with a considerably harder degree.

A yap of pain escaped his lips as he gritted, “Women are not meant to be violent.”

“Women are exceedingly violent when unencumbered by society. Some tribal societies even encourage a woman’s violence. . . For instance, many of the native tribes of North America leave torture to the women.”

His hands came up and he held them in supplication. “Now, I am going to reach around and untie you. Shall you trust me?”

“Trust is hardly a word that shall ever be in my list of feelings with regards to you, my lord, but in this instance, I shall have to hold on for dear life, and allow your hands the freedom to do what is necessary.

He merely shook his head at her verbosity then began to work at her bindings. When he’d gotten the first part of the binding loosed, he said, “I shall recall your warning and keep myself to ladies entrenched in society.”

“How very boring for you.” The braided rope eased from her wrists and though she was tempted to whip her hands forward, she continued to grip his continually hard and rather large cock lest he win the upper hand.

“Boring as it may be, I am rather fond of my cock and should like to keep it where it is.”

“Do you promise to leave me be when I unhand you?” She had no desire to have to fend him off again, once she released him.

“Madam, no man in his right mind could leave you be. You are a veritable fortress to be climbed and overcome.”

She squeezed a little harder and he yelped again. “Yes! Yes. I swear.”

“Why should I believe you?”

His hands came up to her shoulders and gripped with their own determination. “Because you have me, quite literally, by the balls.”

“I do, don’t I?”

“Mmmm.”

She glowered at him, weighing the dangers of her predicament. It was clear that Jack’s brother was no gentleman and yet, they couldn’t sit thusly like some Sisyphus, watching the sun go up and down and she stuck to her task of keeping him at bay. “So be it.”

And she began to loosen her hands, but not before the pointed crack of a pistol echoed through the air.

CHAPTER 13

*B*eing outwitted by one's wife was not a feeling Jack cared to ever repeat. It had never occurred to him that he could underestimate her tenacity so wholly, for he thought he had possessed a relatively good understanding of her skill and audacity. But one did not expect a tied up woman to quite soundlessly hurl herself from a rapidly moving conveyance in the middle of the night.

Did one?

No. One did not. After all, he wasn't so hideous that such an action should be necessary. Or was he? It didn't bear consideration that she found him so entirely unlikable that bouncing along a dirt road in the middle of the night was more appealing than his company.

Granted. . . He had tied her up, but she had flailed so and escape, whether she realized it or not, meant his grandmother, full of wrath at being foiled in her plans, would very possibly shred Cordelia's name so thoroughly that no one would ever receive her again. And while he realized that Cordelia didn't have much esteem for their class, she did need some support. If only for her work. His grandmother could see that she never, ever had assistance of any kind from anyone again in any corner of Europe.

Regardless of his hideousness or lack thereof, he would once again have to rethink his appraisal of his wife and accept that he had been lacking in his esteem for her and his judgement of her sanity. Surely, only a half-mad woman. . . or an Eversleigh woman. . . would do such a thing.

There was nothing to explain it. It was his duty as her husband, however temporary that state, to take her in hand and help her to understand that such activities only led to neck breakage.

Riding back in the direction from whence they had come at breakneck speed was a damned nuisance. Coaching horses did not the best seats make, and he refused to consider that the odd churning sensation in his stomach was anything more than indigestion.

Nothing had happened to her. He was not *afraid*.

After all, if a group of bandits had fallen upon her, she, no doubt, would have them all singing and dancing her tune within moments, or at the worst, he'd

locate them incapacitated murmuring about whirling dervish females and witchcraft.

Yes. . . Witchcraft. That had to be it. His wife had learned the black arts in the East and this would explain her infuriating behavior and astounding abilities. Yet, he found himself thanking the dubious maker for these black arts. They would keep her safe.

As he rode further and further without her in sight, the pit of his stomach tightened into such a ball he was sure that he was going to seize up. He refused to believe it was with concern for her safety. . . Absolutely refused. . . Said refusal didn't stop him from swearing that he would wrap his fingers about her pretty neck and shake some sense into her.

The sight that eventually befell him was not reassuring.

A woman, unmistakably his wife, in Gemma's cream puff of a costume, sat astride a man in the dirt. He pulled his pistol from the back of his breeches and aimed it high in the air, ready to ride to her rescue.

All feelings of knightly chivalry deflated as irrational and blind rage tumbled through him. She didn't seem to be struggling. In fact, she was engaged in conversation with the man beneath her. Which nearly urged him to aim his pistol at the man sprawled in the dirt, writhing beneath his wife.

Writhing. Beneath. His wife.

A strangled sound strained from his throat. She appeared to have her hands in a rather compromising place. . . On the man's cock.

He pulled the trigger on the primed pistol and the perfectly designed firearm went off. A crack of gunfire mixed with the sight of smoke and embers pierced the cold night.

Cordelia's gaze jerked away from the prone man beneath her and snapped up towards him.

Those dark blue eyes of hers, the color of black sapphires in the moonlight, widened to twin saucers of dismay. Dawning recognition replaced any anxiety she might have been experiencing. "Blast!"

"Hello, Jack," Charles called blithely. "Thank God you've come."

"Charles!" he exclaimed. . . The full realization that his wife had been fondling his brother's balls began to sink in as did a rage so intense he was uncertain if he would be able to speak further let alone act with any sort of restraint.

"Could you call your wife off?" Charles appealed, his voice oddly strained through the cold air. "Her grip is reminiscent of Nelson."

Cordelia blinked. "Lord Nelson fondled your. . . Erm. . ."

Pain pounded between Jack's eyes, a pain resembling a nail being driven solidly into an unyielding knot of wood. He had heard that some women were veritable headaches, but he'd never believed the term could be taken literally. At this rate, he was going to have to murder someone. At this particular moment he wasn't certain if it was his brother or his wife, or perhaps both. He might even have to include himself. But there was one thing that he couldn't escape. Cordelia was one of a kind. Still. . .

"You've been *fondling* him?" Jack asked, his voice so low, one might have thought it had rumbled up from deep in the primordial caverns of the earth.

"No!" she exclaimed, indignation lighting her pale cheeks.

"And Nelson was our intractable bulldog if you must know," piped in Charles, still lying underneath her. As though having his balls in an iron grip upon the road was a nightly occurrence, he folded his hands behind his head and lounged upon the earth with the same sort of comfort he did upon his Oriental rugs. "Your tenacity resembles him in the most singular of ways. You see, once he got his grip on something, he never let go."

Cordelia blanched. Clearly recalling the location of her hands, she scrambled backwards in crab fashion, sliding along Charles' legs. One of her elbows found Charles' groin as she attempted to get to her feet.

Instantly, Charles let out a howl and then a groan of pain that sailed sopranolike through the silent night. The moan was then replaced by a rather unmanly whimper. His limbs coiled slowly inward, pulling him into the fetal position.

"I say," Cordelia muttered, brushing her hands furiously against her frock. "Is he quite all right?"

"Impotent," Charles gasped. "Your wife has rendered me impotent."

"A blessing for the human race," she sniffed, without a hint of remorse.

"All the same, I'd still like to make attempts," Charles wheezed.

Jack eyed his brother, then his wife, then the pistol. He could reload. It wouldn't take much time. Instead he found himself asking, "What are you doing here, Charles?"

In slow degrees, Charles retracted from his childlike position and tentatively sat up. He winced and stared mournfully down at his cock. Then he sighed and lifted his attention away from his wounded southerlies. "If you must know, I was concerned."

"Balls," Cordelia huffed.

Charles' eyes narrowed and he swung an accusatory stare up at Cordelia. "Must we talk about what pains me so greatly, madam? I have come all the way from town to the country, which I abhor. The place is riddled with animals, for God's sake, and dirt and" he shivered with blatant disgust, "fresh air."

Jack's gloved fingers tightened about the reins and it was all he could do not to grab Cordy and ride like mad into the night. "Leave off with the dissertation on the ills of the country. Why'd you follow?"

Charles gave him a lopsided grin. "Grandmama is sending riders after you."

"Famous!" Cordelia's beautiful eyes widened. "What kind of dowager is your grandmother?"

"The determined kind," Charles said flatly.

Bugger it. Jack winced.

'Twas no surprise, but he'd hoped his grandmother might act with a measure of restraint. She handled the estates and the political necessities with admirable aplomb but she did hate being defied. It was her one weak point. She'd have men chasing after them and then knowing their location, she would only be a half day's ride behind. Ready to reiterate why her plan was the only one which made any sense and therefore must be obeyed.

"Charles." He drew in a good dose of cold air through his nose and swung down off the horse, landing so hard, his boots crunched the hard earth. "Did you think in following me you'd lead them off the scent? Hmmm?"

Charles smoothed his hands down the front of his waistcoat and in one quick move, sprang to his feet. "Please, no one can exceed my stealth."

Cordelia smothered a snigger.

Charles eyed her with disdain. "Madam, I have more experience sneaking about at night, eluding discovery, than you could ever fathom."

"I don't doubt it," she drawled. But then a curious expression creased her brow and her gaze traveled from Charles then over to Jack. And then she repeated the movement at least three times. Her gorgeously pert and stinging mouth opened slowly.

It seemed she was making a mental list of their physical similarities. Jack had to grant her it was a shocking sight. No one could tell them apart except for dress and manner of speech. Even their mother mixed them up on more than one occasion.

"'Tis a cursed and fair proof that if there is a God, he is not benign," she whispered, completely astounded.

"I do believe your wife is daft." Charles arched one of his black brows and strode forward, crossing the short distance between himself and Cordelia, then waved a hand in front of her staring eyes. "What is she on about?"

She smacked his hand away. "A benevolent God never would have created two of you, you nincompoop."

"Nincompoop?" Charles drew up to his solid height of six foot four inches and peered down at Cordelia's considerably shorter size. "Nincompoop. I've been insulted many a time in my life but never with a trivial word. If you're going to insult someone, woman—"

"Fine," she snapped then smiled up at him with a hint of devilry that would have lured even Mephistopheles out to dance, "You're the oozing fester upon an ass' behind."

"Ah." Charles' lips twitched. "Now that will do."

She nodded tersely. "Thank you. Now, may I be released from the Eversleigh family's scintillating presence? I was making quite a good escape before I ran upon your twin."

"No," he and his brother said in unison.

"Why?" she demanded. "And you needn't shout."

"We weren't shouting," Charles replied quickly. "Were we, old man?"

"We were speaking with authority," Jack agreed, falling into the pattern of discussion Charles and he inevitably took when conversing.

She rolled her eyes.

"Besides it is not in your best interests for us to let you go," Jack said, wishing he could get her out of Charles' presence and back into the coach. The more time he spent with her, the more he found her to be infuriating and bullheaded. . . and absolutely breathtaking.

Even now, with all the trouble she'd caused, seeing her standing unrepentant and bold as brass was damned invigorating. He'd never met any woman who could keep pace with himself or Charles and she was doing such an admirable job, she might leave him in the dust if he didn't keep on the polished toes of his boots.

"Why?" she repeated, this time folding her pale arms over her beautiful breasts. The gesture pressed the glorious mounds together and he imagined how he might be able to suckle each nipple in turn until each was glistening and hard.

"For a supposedly intelligent woman, you sound about three years old," put in Charles.

She glared at him, a glare so intense, what was left of Charles' cock no doubt withered completely.

"My God, old man," Charles quipped, "You've married Medusa."

"Better Medusa than a brainless sheep of a woman." Her hands came down and she braced her fists on her hips, a passionately temperamental gesture. "I do not wish to stay in this damp, idiot infused country. So, why will you not free me at once?"

"Firstly," Charles started, "Our ancient grandmama, dearest dowager, our matriarchal queen, our commander, our Nelson, our Emperor divine..."

Her hands fell from her hips and she leaned forward studying him carefully before gasping, "Sir, you are drunk."

"How kind of you to finally notice," Charles lilted, a slightly loopy and audacious grin lifting his lips.

"He's almost always drunk," sighed Jack. "And he's the most agreeable when drunk."

Cordelia gaped with astonishment. "This is agreeable?"

"Tis a most pleasant state of being, drunkenness," Charles drawled. "Almost the company of everyone one is inflicted with improves when one is drunk. However, yours, madam, may be without help."

Cordelia weighed this then ignored it. Her fingers flew back up to a folded position over her ribs, an action which caused her breasts to plump even further. "Fascinating as your thought patterns are, my lord, I do believe you were about to tell us what you would do here."

Jack stared. He knew she'd just spoken, but concentration suddenly became damn difficult as did the realization that he was in a constant state of lust for his wife. Damn it all, he was about to wax poetic about her perfect breasts and how he longed to worship her at the fount of Venus.

He couldn't ever recall being so fascinated with a pair of breasts. Nor the woman that went along with them. The fact that she was his wife only added a confusing element to the mix. According to the law, he could have her when, where, and as often as he liked. He'd never realized how amiable such a law could be.

It took Jack a moment to realize Charles was also staring, his own dark eyes transfixed on the pale globes. In fact, he seemed rather distracted by Cordelia's perfectly formed charms.

Jack crossed the short distance and grabbed his brother's lapel. "You only just got your balls back brother."

Charles scowled and brushed at his hand. "Leave off. A lady gave me this waistcoat. 'Tis my favorite. Besides, you've never been one to be stinting. Perhaps she'd enjoy it."

"Enjoy what?" she asked.

A groan tore from Jack's throat.

"We've always had splendid reviews," Charles assured as he continued to dislodge Jack's fingers from his embroidered waistcoat. "We can offer references."

"We?" she repeated, color lighting her cheeks, even in the moonlight.

"Mmmm." Charles grinned a Devil's grin, shoving at Jack's grip. "What about it, my dear. Would you like to be pressed between twins?"

Every raging instinct instructed Jack to belt his brother on the chin. Curiosity stayed his hand and he found himself desperately interested in Cordelia's reply.

She stared blankly for several moments then her face contorted with horror. "Oh!" She lifted a hand to her face and shook her head, an image no doubt branding itself on her brain. "I would rather drink camel urine."

Jack's heart did a surprising leap in his usually unfeeling chest. The feeling was clearly relief mingled with pleasure. The very idea of sharing his wife or the idea that she might be interested in such activity curdled his stomach.

"Charles, attempt to pull yourself from the gutter," he ground out, unrelentingly holding his twin.

"I don't think that shall be possible, but I will limit myself to pertinent conversation." Charles batted at Jack's hand and managed to twist away. As he smoothed the wrinkled fabric, he blew out an irritated breath. "Now. Where was I?"

"Why. . . I. . . Must. . . Stay," Cordy said with the same slowness one used with confused children.

"Ah. Yes." Charles' face brightened with amusement. "You must go with my brother, because Grandmama sent for the Prime Minister this morning."

"And that is pertinent how?" she echoed.

"Because, if Grandmama wants your marriage to my dear brother here to be permanent, that's what she will get. Or if she wants you tossed out of the country, your name blackened in every court in Europe, that's what she'll get, too. Given the glower upon her face this morning, it could go either way."

Cordelia stared, for once, apparently speechless.

Jack cringed and finally let go of his brother's clothing so he could lift his hands and rub them against his temples. He'd known his grandmother would be

displeased by their mad-capped escape. It was why he'd avoided a direct meeting. It had never occurred to him that the old girl would go to such extremes so quickly. "You're certain?"

"Heard them myself," Charles defended. "The old girl thinks I sleep a good deal more than I actually do. In any case, I thought I should warn you."

"Why?" Cordelia asked, her voice considerably more concerned than it had been a few moments before.

Jack thrust a hand through his hair, his stance growing tense. "Because if you stay with me for a few days, she may cool and we can come up with a plan to appease her. If you go off on your own, she'll do whatever seems right to her now."

Charles nodded in agreement, his black hair flopping about his forehead. "And right now, she wants your guts for her garters."

"But all I wanted was an annulment," she protested. "She didn't even want me until yesterday!"

Charles shrugged then pulled out a silver flask. "I don't think Grandmama has truly given a single thought to what you want, only what she deems best for the family. So, you might want to get used to being called Your Grace, Your Grace. She wants you for his duchess, first and foremost, and she's seems to be certain that she can mold you."

"I'm not suitable." Her lips pursed in a delightfully infuriated moue. "I won't stay married to him."

Jack found her declaration to be surprisingly unpleasant. Granted, he'd shunted her off for a decade, but hearing her clear disdain for him wasn't exactly reflective of his general ease with ladies. "Well, thank you for that resounding compliment."

"You don't wish it either," she said evenly, an unreadable look in her intelligent eyes.

Untwisting the cap from his flask, Charles cleared his throat. "My suggestion —"

"You have a reasonable suggestion?" she queried, cocking her head to the side. "I have my doubts."

"Faithless woman." He lifted the flask in salute. "Of course I do."

Jack plunged a hand through his hair and wished his brother would just disappear into the night. Still, the man did usually have excellent ideas. Especially in regards to the ability to elude their grandmother.

Still, the last thing he wanted was for Cordelia to be anywhere in Charles' vicinity whilst he attempted to win her over.

After all, it was Charles who had declared that he act without morality with regards to his wife. God knew what Charles would tell Cordelia. . .

And he doubted seriously if Cordelia would allow him to whisk her off if she knew that he'd rescued her this morning with the sole intention of seducing her.

No. There was only one way to convince Cordelia to come with him, and that was for her own protection and the promise of eventual freedom. And he would do everything in his power to protect her from the will of his grandmother, even if it meant that in a weekt time, he had to let her go. . . A thought that caused him a strange amount of pain. A thought he wouldn't let himself linger on.

CHAPTER 14

All this time, she had assumed her husband was the least reputable man in Christendom. She'd been mistaken. His brother certainly took the crack-brained cake and, given the circumstances, Jack was handling himself with remarkable aplomb.

Still, the very idea that she was imprisoned by not one, but two Eversleigh brothers was more than there was to be borne.

For perhaps the thousandth time, she lamented her unfortunate decision to leave behind her simple existence of categorizing mummies and scattered beads. England, so bucolic and ruled by strictures as reliable as time itself, had appeared to have been an unintimidating custard of a place compared with the wilds of Africa.

How mistaken she had been. And being mistaken was another state to which she was unaccustomed. In fact, in the last few days she had been thrown into more unaccustomed states of being than she had in her entire existence.

"Take my hand," her husband ordered, extending the strong appendage towards her.

She eyed it. "Whatever for?"

He let out a long-suffering sigh. "My good woman, must you question everything?"

"As a general rule. . . Yes."

"You are going to ride with me," he said simply.

"I prefer to walk."

"You could always ride with me," contributed Charles as he untwisted the top of his silver flask.

"No!" she and her husband vetoed in unison.

"You cannot walk," Jack said tightly. "We will be traveling a goodly distance and you are hardly wearing trekking boots."

"A practical point," she conceded, feeling the rocks and clumps of dirt pushing up through the kid leather of her slippers to the pads of her feet. Not that her feet weren't tough. Unlike London ladies, she could hie back to London without too much carnage to her toes.

“Will such a consideration induce your cooperation?”

She was about to reply with a firm, *no*, but from the distance, the rapid thudding of horse hooves intruded upon her ability to respond. Horse hooves indicated the possibly imminent presence of the ominous minions of the dowager duchess.

“Well I—”

Before she could even finish her reply, Jack grabbed her and hauled her upon the horse.

For the second time that day, Cordelia found herself being carried in Neanderthal fashion.

With a kick of his boots and a snap of reins, the stallion raced down the road. Cordelia stared at the dark road flying beneath her. Struggling seemed her first line of defense but she enjoyed the shape of her head and had no desire to fall beneath the steel shod hooves. So, with rising fury at his high handedness, she gripped Jack’s calf and forced her body to relax against the charging horse’s powerful body.

She had no idea how long they rode, but they didn’t cease for hours, her own body vibrating with each powerful thud of the horse’s gait.

Jack’s gloved hand, twisted into the back of her frock, kept her relatively stable, and her own familiarity with horses lent her some ease in the wild dash, but her stomach began to protest and the pressure in her head from its angle began to have the most upsetting effects on her equilibrium. “Stop!” she shouted.

He said nothing but kept on riding.

It was tempting to cast up her accounts on his leg, but even she didn’t wish to undergo that undignified occurrence. “Cease or I shall be sick upon you!”

That had the proper effect and the gait of the powerful animal slowed. With each loping step, she drew in slow breaths. When the animal finally came to a halt, she slid down off it. Her slippers hit the earth and her legs wobbled.

Only Jack’s firm hold on her shoulder kept her upright. The sound of his boots hit the earth beside her.

“My apologies—”

She held up her hand, gulping in the cold air. When at last her stomach stilled and she felt herself again, she whipped towards him. “I should punch you.”

“No doubt.”

“Why are you doing this?” she demanded.

“I was afraid.”

“Of what?” she asked, her voice softening.

“That you weren’t going to come with me,” he said simply.

That silenced the set down she so longed to give him. “Why do you wish me to come with you so much?”

“I have been compelled.”

She narrowed her eyes. “To annoy your grandmother?”

There was a long pause in the dark night. “I have been compelled to not let you go.”

Cordelia hesitated in her fury. “Why would you say such a thing?” she whispered.

Those dark eyes of his bore into her with honesty. “It is the truth.”

“It can’t be,” she protested, an alarming lump forming in her throat.

“Why?”

“Because you wanted nothing to do with me,” she whispered.

“Cordelia,” he said, her name a soft caress. “I never knew you.”

She folded her arms, determined not to let his words break down her defenses. No matter how much she liked them. “And now that you know me, you are entitled to drag me across the country?”

“I am only giving us what we both so desire.”

“And that is?” she challenged.

Jack’s hand darted out and slid around her waist. The powerful splay of his palm pressed into the small of her back arching her towards him.

Desire and anger raced through her, a formidable combination. Fury at her traitorous hunger erupted inside her. She hauled back her palm and was ready to crack it against his cheek but she didn’t. She hesitated, her gaze trailing to his soft lips. Lips so strong, yet lush, and full of promise. And in that hesitation, he acted.

Jack lifted her up onto her tiptoes and he bent down capturing her mouth in one swift, hot kiss. The kiss was meant to devour and devour it did. All her resolve and anger sparked into a well of need. Her clenched hands relaxed and, instead of shoving him away, she grabbed onto his broad shoulders and opened her mouth to him.

It wasn’t fair. It wasn’t fair that for her whole life she had to forgo ultimate pleasure so that one day she could be free of him. . . and now? Now, that she was in his presence with him kissing her, it was the most perplexing thing to realize that she had desired no man as she now desired him.

For just a little longer. That was all she desired. Just a little longer and so she tilted her head back and drank in the sensation of her body melded against his.

Just as he should be, he was hard in all the places that she was soft. The planes of his chest were taut and even through layers of fabric she could feel the precise definition of his strength. She wanted to drown in it. To give herself up to the pleasure.

The tips of his fingers traced over her back, then his palms slid up her sides until they were at her breasts ready to cup them.

Oh, how she ached for his hands to cover her breasts. But she couldn't. Could she?

This was madness! She was throwing her future away for his touch!

Panting, she tore herself away. "I cannot do this."

His own face was dazed with passion. "You want this," he said and, goodness, his voice was shaded with sin and the promise of all the forbidden things he would do to her.

"I want my freedom more."

"You can have both."

"Don't be absurd."

"Give me a week. One week."

"Why?"

"To pleasure you. In any way. . . In every way you wish and then if you wish it, I will find a way for you to be free. You will never have to see England or my family again with no ill effects. If that is what you wish."

Good God, could she say yes?



Christ, he needed her to say yes. His sanity was riding upon her answer. Just the feel of her beneath his gloved fingers was the sort of temptation a boy feels on his first night with his first woman. He hadn't felt this completely alive in a decade and he couldn't relinquish that for anything.

Cordelia licked her lips and swayed. "If anyone ever knew."

"They never will," he assured her. Hell, at this point he'd say anything to get her damned frock off her body and free her for his touch, but luckily, his reasoning this time was based on the truth.

Her breasts rose and fell quickly and her eyes were wary, even if they were full of heat. "You will let me go. If I give you one week."

His desire twisted up into something else that felt suspiciously like regret. It sounded as if she were selling herself to him for her freedom. Perhaps that was what she was doing and it was, in the end, what he was asking her to do. But in one week, he could rid himself of his hunger for her, couldn't he? And she would get her freedom and a bit of pleasure in the bargain. . . That had to be the answer. "One week and then I will take you to the nearest port and I will handle my grandmother." He hesitated. He'd never gone against the old girl before. But he could. If he had to. And for Cordelia, he would. He wouldn't let her be destroyed for him. "I am the Duke of Hunt after all."

"Then I won't say no," she whispered. "I don't even wish to say no. But you must understand it is not *you* I desire, as difficult as it is to admit. I don't even know you. It is your body. . . your abilities that I long for."

He nodded, his own body humming with the knowledge that he was going to use every bit of carnal knowledge he had to win her over. It was ever the case. His body was a vehicle for a woman's corruption and he would joyfully corrupt her. It was in his nature and, at present, whether she wished to admit it or no, it was her primary desire. "One week," he said softly.

It would have to be enough.

CHAPTER 15

The hunting lodge on the Devon coast was ensconced in a small valley, with sharp, rocky hills covered in verdant grass on three sides and the crashing ocean on the other. Cordelia stared out at the sea, knowing that somewhere out there (well, due south really) was Africa and her brothers.

It was all very disconcerting to know that they were getting on without her. She'd placed a great store into the importance of her contributions to their work. Surely, no one could replace her? This unexpected uncertainty in her work was a sudden and most unwelcome shock and she could only assume it pertained to her husband still sitting atop his horse. For each day she spent here with him, each day in this grey, unfriendly, rule-ridden country, she was away from her dreams.

She swung her glance to the two-story, stone, Georgian house. Inside it was her ruin. She scowled at it. Not because she thought the stone-faced house ugly, but rather because she had a remarkable desire to go inside and get on with it.

The entire ride here had been a battle within. To give in or not to give in? Well, she'd promised a week, and unlike some others that she could mention (the entire Eversleigh clan for instance) she kept her promises. And this was a promise she might actually enjoy, if she gave herself permission.

Jack swung down from the formidably sized equine and stood behind her, molding his front to her back. As he slid his hand to her middle, he whispered against her neck, "Steam is exuding from your ears."

Her stomach fluttered at the close contact and a large part of her, the virgin part, urged her to bolt. The other side, her adventurous no-nonsense side, said running would be the act of a coward, and a coward she was not. She lifted her chin, determined to seem unmoved by his presence and the spicy maleness of him that was, if she admitted it (something she would never do aloud), swoon-worthy. "My brain is a trifle taxed."

"Are you sure you have not overheated from my very presence?"

She glanced up and threw him a condescending stare. "Your presence, while intriguing, will hardly induce my brain to go roaming."

He chuckled, his dark eyes heating with amusement and decidedly something more exciting. "Are you certain?" Those eyes of his focused on her

lips, his lids suddenly heavy and not with sleep. "It seems to wander off every time we kiss."

Much to her consternation, her lips parted, as breathing normally suddenly became a challenge. "Are you attempting to seduce me?" She cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders, refusing to be so easily won. "Because if you are, you are failing."

His lips parted in a slow smile. An amused, knowing smile. "Not all seduction is about sexual congress, my dear."

His knowing was greatly irritating as she was used to knowing most everything. And yet. . . And yet, she couldn't help being suddenly excited at the prospect of learning something *new*. Something entirely foreign to her. So instead of pretending as if she already was aware of such a thing, she furrowed her brow and asked, "Is it not?"

He brought his other hand to rest on her hip and slowly turned her body so that it was only with an inch of distance from his. "Seduction is a game."

She was not particularly good at games. She was much better at study and work. So she rarely played them lest she fail. And she hated the idea of failing somehow in lovemaking. How humiliating it would be to be bad at it. She searched his face, looking for any sign that he was ribbing her, but his face was only husky with desire and something else. . . Understanding. She swallowed. "Have we already been playing it?"

"Most certainly," he said softly.

She nodded. "Good. What next then?"

He laughed a full booming laugh. "Eager are we?"

She scowled. "One cannot learn without practical application. The reading of books is most useful, but eventually one must, how shall we say. . . Take the bull by the horns."

"What an interesting analogy. I do think I like being compared to a fiery bull." His amused grin belied the seriousness of his words and he paused, the sea breeze suddenly whipping up and playing with his dark hair. "How much theoretical knowledge do you have?"

Cordy bit down on the inside of her cheek. Not much. Her mother had been reticent to discuss the subject despite her own scandalous behavior. In fact her mother had spent little time at all with her, and certainly never the sort of time which would induce such intimate conversation, and her father had shoved a book of animal husbandry at her. Her brothers had certainly given her many clues as to the necessities of the male anatomy. But beyond the basics, she was

as untutored as anyone could be and suddenly she found herself tensing, a feeling of shocking insufficiency sweeping over her. She was Jack Eversleigh's equal, nay superior, in almost every way. . . But one. She averted her eyes and mumbled, "Not much."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Not much," she huffed again.

He bent down slightly, angling his ear towards her. "Do forgive me, I missed that."

She whipped her gaze back to him, ready to deliver a blazing set down when she spotted the twinkle in his eyes and the twitching of his lips. She scowled (an expression quite unfamiliar to her but suddenly frequent in its application) up at him. "Have you finished?"

His shoulders began to shake with laughter. The laughter of dark, wicked temptation and yet there was a lightness to it. The sort of lightness that convinced one to stick their hand in a fire, certain they would not be burned. "Oh duchess, I have not even begun."

And with that, he swept her up into his arms, cradling her body against his broad, linen clad chest.

Cordy gasped and her own body revolted, rather like that of a cat held over water. "What the Devil—"

Jack grinned. "Now. Now. Enjoy it."

One would have thought she weighed no more than a sack of potatoes the way he could bandy her about and it was getting quite distressing. She was an independent woman after all, more than capable of ambulating on her own.

Where was her parasol when she needed it? Then again, his muscled arms really were rather nice, and her palm over the solid beat of his heart was most curious. Perhaps this was all part of seduction? "Enjoy what exactly, may I ask?"

Jack strode down the small, stone walk lined with white and yellow roses leading up to the house and he paused at the door, and kicked with a booted foot. It gave a most alarming squeal as the lock broke free and the red painted panel swung open. "Why, me carrying you over the threshold of course."

Cordy froze in his arms, her heart doing the strangest dance within her chest. By all rights, the very symbol of him carrying her over a threshold should have induced nothing but irritation and rebellion within her.

Irritation and rebellion seemed to have abandoned her somewhere out on the road, because, instead, she felt a sort of aching warmth in the vicinity of her

heart, an aching warmth which sent her hands up to his strong neck. “Well if you insist on playing a part, Your Grace, so shall I.”

“Good. That shall make this all perfectly pleasant.”

Playing parts.

Cordy swallowed as she stared at his perfect face. It was all a game. Her intimacy with a man far more beautiful than she, was an illusion. He was the toast of society and she was an oddity. And she had to remember that. Or else she might lose the greatest prize of all. Her heart. She shook her head and glanced about the small foyer. “Down please.”

“Enough romance?”

She snorted, ramming up the wall she kept in place to keep others out. She wouldn’t lose her heart. She would not, for she’d never let it within distance to be captured. Besides, her heart was already firmly owned by Egypt and she was not the sort to switch allegiances over a few minor flutters of infatuation. “Seduction seems more preferable to romance.”

She turned slowly, taking in the brightly champagne brocade papered walls, and cream and gold carpet beneath her feet. The house was beautiful. A diamond bauble with no substance to it.

“Aren’t they the same?” Jack asked.

“One would assume there was some affection in romance.”

The humor slipped from his face. “Of course. And there is to be no—”

“Affection between you and me?” she queried as she made a show of studying the dark wood stairs climbing the right side of the foyer and then down the wide hall which led to the back of the house. “No, I don’t think there shall be any of that.”

“I see,” he said, his voice lacking the joviality which had warmed it before. “Purely physical.”

“I thought I had made that clear. Besides, isn’t that your ideal?”

He stared at her for a good long moment, his eyes shuttering. “Yes. Yes is it. I had forgotten.”

“A bad memory?” She forced a playful smile, feeling that somehow they had stepped onto dangerous ground. “Sure sign of old age, Your Grace. You must—”

“Jack,” he said flatly.

She blinked. “I beg your pardon?”

“Stop *your gracing* me. My name is Jack.”

The air around her seemed to chill and for the first time in the last twenty-four hours, she recalled her initial impression that her husband was hiding

something very dark beneath his jovial surface.

“Jack,” she tested slowly, the word playing out over her tongue and teeth. It was remarkably sensual suddenly saying his name, and saying it carefully. Despite herself, another smile (good lord how often did one need to curve their lips?) replaced her recent, brittle grin. A gentle, genuine smile. “A splendid name.”

“As is yours.”

To her consternation her cheeks blazed at the simple compliment. “I had nothing to do with the choosing of it, I assure you.”

He sighed and then ran his gloved hand through his dark hair, tousling it into unruly waves. “Are you incapable of accepting a compliment?”

She cocked her head to the side, contemplating his question. She’d never really given compliments any thought. She didn’t receive them generally unless it had to do with her efficient running of her sites. “It depends.”

He took a step forward, his booted step silent on the carpet. “On what?”

She shrugged, her heart beginning to pound again. “What the compliment is on.”

“If I were to compliment your intellect?”

“Most acceptable.” She nodded and involuntarily began to take a step back. Stopping herself mid-retreat, she quipped, “Thank you.”

His gaze roamed up and down her body as if he sensed her sudden discomfort. “I have yet to compliment it. It was a hypothetical.”

She pursed her lips in annoyance. “Must you be so contrary?”

“Must you?”

She hmped and started to turn away, giving him her shoulder.

His hand reached out and slipped his gloved fingers around hers.

She stopped, but did not face him. Her breath came in sudden, quick takes at the intimate feel of his touch. It was so gentle, so soft, yet so alive.

“And if I were to compliment your beauty?”

Her throat suddenly choked up, tightening in a most alarming fashion. To relieve the unfamiliar feeling, she blew out a harsh breath and tried to pry her fingers from his. “Please do not make fun.”

His fingers tightened, refusing to let go his hold. “Make fun?”

She bit down on the inside of her cheek, desperate not to face him. Desperate not to talk of her mother and the horror of being an ugly daughter in the face of a resplendent mama. Squaring her shoulders, she queried quickly, “Are you not hungry? Do we even have any food? I am quite famished.”

“Cordelia,” he said his voice firm yet kind.

“Are there servants?” she rambled on. “Or clothes for goodness sake? I shan’t wear this dress for a—”

“Cordelia,” he cut in pulling her in slow degrees towards him. “You are beautiful.”

She glanced back at him, commanding the tears threatening to lock her throat and sting her eyes to keep at bay. She would never let him see her cry. She knew the weakness of tears in women and she would never fall prey to it. For tears did nothing. “Thank you for your. . . For your exaggeration.”

He lifted his free hand and cupped her cheek lightly, caressing his thumb along her chin. Jack lifted her face upward. “Why do you say exaggeration? Can you not accept what I say?”

“Please do not use lies to seduce me. Especially such blatantly false ones. You do not find me beautiful.”

“Are you mad, woman?” he breathed.

“You said it yourself.”

“Said what?”

“That what you are attracted to is my adventurous spirit. You never once mentioned my beauty.” She looked away. For though it pained her, she could not look into his eyes. Not at this moment, not as she found that there was perhaps a crack in her wall after all.

CHAPTER 16

Just past dawn
The Dukes' Club hideaway

Beautiful girls in Jack's experience knew that they were. . . well, beautiful. As he gazed down into his wife's earnest eyes, his heart beat in the most alarming and painful of ways. What bastard had taught her to believe she was anything less than a diamond of the first water?

And he had an eye for women. Could see the ones that were glorious. The ones that left the powdery, uninspiring, little, pretty faces behind. Cordelia Eversleigh was a woman who could slay a ballroom of men if she so chose and she had absolutely no idea.

That had to change.

If it was the last thing he did, she was going to see how insanely, maddeningly beautiful she was. Carefully, he caressed his thumb over her lower lip, keeping his gaze locked on hers. "You are the most beautiful woman of my acquaintance and since you will not believe what I tell you, I am going to show you."

A flash of fear crossed her features. "I don't see how."

Something strange was happening to him. Something completely unfamiliar and as he lowered his head, he whispered. "Sight isn't very reliable my darling. But this is."

He did not kiss her mouth, but tilted her face slightly and kissed her brow. Then reverently, worshipfully, he traced kisses along his beautiful, unprepossessing wife's face. And with each feather light press of his lips to her warm skin, his body unfurled with a passion so intense, he could scarce draw breath.

A soft gasp emanated from her and she tilted her head back, offering herself up to him.

Inwardly, Jack felt satisfaction that she was blossoming under his touch. Yes. He would help her see how beautiful she was. It was, perhaps, the one thing a man like himself could give her.

Her hands came up from her sides and tentatively rested on his shoulders. “Kiss me.”

“I am kissing you,” he teased softly.

Much to his amazement, she pounded a fist against his arm. “Properly,” she demanded.

He laughed. His darling Cordelia wanted what she wanted and he couldn’t help but admire that. “And how exactly is that?” he asked against her soft skin as he slid his lips along her jaw.

Cordelia’s chest lifted up and down, her breasts pressing suggestively against her tight frock. “W-with passion.”

The hitch in her voice was nearly his undoing but he would not allow his passion to take rein. Not yet. Not when he needed to gain her trust so that she might enjoy her first bout of lovemaking.

It was so tempting to brand her lips with his kiss but that wasn’t right. Not with Cordelia. “Kiss *me*.”

“What?”

He bent his head down until his lips were within her reach. “You kiss me. . . If you want to, that is.”

She licked her lower lip and stared at his lips for a moment as if this were an idea she had never contemplated. Slowly, she traced her hands up his arms, placed them atop his shoulders, lifted herself onto her toes, and kissed him. Hard.

He was tempted to pull back at the frontal assault to his mouth, but he wanted her to venture into her unknown land and, to do that, he would follow her lead.

She leaned back, a look of frustration upon her face. “That wasn’t right.”

He refrained from grinning, knowing how she’d take it. “How do you want to be kissed? Think about that. Then kiss me in that way.”

She nodded and closed her eyes. A soft blush caressed her cheeks and her lips curved in a seductive smile.

“You’ve decided?” he asked, his own body alive with desire. Desire so intense he kept himself still, lest he drag her body against his.

She opened her eyes. Carefully, she brought one hand to rest upon his cheek. Tilting her head to the side, she touched her lips to his so softly at first it was barely a kiss at all, but then she began to open her mouth slightly, taking his bottom lip gently between hers and then she urged his face closer to hers and slipped her tongue into his mouth.

Jack's brain nearly went blank. Good Christ. Cordelia's mouth worked over his with a shockingly sensual skill and the feel of her delicate tongue tracing over his shoved him over the edge. He wrapped his arms about her, plastering her body against his and every curve of her form melded to his.

Splaying his hands over her back, he touched his tongue to hers, giving now as much as taking.

At the onslaught, Cordelia slid her fingers through his hair, holding on to him for dear life as she threw herself wholeheartedly into their kiss.

The loud bang of a gunshot had Jack grabbing Cordy. He shoved her down to the floor and he tossed his body atop hers, his entire form going into battle shock.

Plasterwork showered down upon them and Jack glanced up, searching for the shooter. "Cease! It's the Duke of Hunt."

"Your Grace?" a voice called from the back of the house. Clearly, hiding behind a wall, making ready for another attack.

"Yes, damn it," he growled.

"I don't believe you," the armed man called.

Jack let forth a blue streak of curses.

"Who is that?" Cordy hissed, her eyes wide and her face decidedly flushed from the weight of his body atop hers.

"One of Charles' cracked soldiers. I believe it's Harris."

"C-cracked?"

"Now is not the opportune moment to explain," Jack said. Explaining how Charles and Jack gave employment to men who were too shaken from the battlefields to do any sort of work was a time consuming business that most of the *ton* thought was complete nonsense. Charles had found the fellow to care for The Dukes' Club's private country gathering. "Harris?" he called.

"Password," the other man said most determinedly.

Jack grimaced. "French Letter."

Immediately, Harris shuffled out into the hall, his curly, gold hair threaded with silver ablaze like an off-balance halo in the morning light. "Pass friend."

Jack sighed and rolled off Cordelia, refusing to contemplate the intimacy of their position, not when Harris was in the vicinity.

Cordy oomphed as he redistributed his weight and as soon as she could clearly breathe again she asked, "Why in goodness name, would French communications be a password?"

Harris grinned. "Not communications ma'am. They're—"

“Harris,” Jack growled before the other man could educate his wife in the practices of sheathing a cock for protection against the diseases of Venus. It was tempting to give the old soldier a set down, but ’twould do no good but to crush the other man, who no doubt took his hard won position very seriously. “Good work.”

Harris gave a nod. “Thank you, Your Grace. I was reading and heard most curious noises. I saw you, but one can never be too certain. Doubles don’t you know. Old Boney, he’s a sly one.”

Cordy glanced at Jack askance. “Boney?”

“Bonaparte,” Jack offered, somehow keeping his face straight lest he harm old Harris’ feelings. The old fellow had taken a musket butt to the head and never quite recovered. He’d saved the colors though, never letting them fall into enemy hands. He’d been a hero. He was a man who inspired hundreds of other men to face the French bravely, despite the seemingly never-ending supply of soldiers in Napoleon’s infamous columns and cavalry.

Now, the rest of England found him to be an irritant. Someone expendable as though men like Harris weren’t saving the nation from tyranny and French rule. Jack shook the sadness aside, unwilling to dwell on such thoughts. Not with Cordy beside him. She was sunshine to his sorrow and he would never contaminate her with that side of his life.

She didn’t deserve that kind of poison. No. She deserved a million perfect days and someone to worship her as the prim and maddeningly seductive goddess she was.

“My apologies ma’am,” Harris said, sketching an odd, little bow, his hair flopping about his ears. “But spies be everywhere. Couldn’t take the risk of failing Lord Charles or His Grace.”

Cordy stared for a moment before smiling. “You did your duty most successfully, I assure you. I, for one, understand how important it is to be diligent in the protection of what one values.”

Harris’ cheeks blossomed red.

Jack eyed his wife, a shocked sort of awe warming the general vicinity of his heart. Many would have offered a snide comment or, at best, ignored the old soldier. Cordelia spoke with utter sincerity. It was beautiful and heartbreaking at once because he could not recall one single person speaking thusly to himself.

Jack looked away quickly, horrified that he could be jealous of Harris and the kindness his wife bestowed upon the fellow. Jack sucked in a fortifying breath.

He didn't need kindness or sincere words. That was not what was at his core. And to think otherwise was foolish. Yes. Very foolish.

"What do you do here, Your Grace?"

Jack snapped out of his reverie and focused on the servant. "We've come to stay the week."

Harris rubbed his whiskered chin. "Oh aye. Secret business, no doubt?"

"Exactly," Jack assured. "Can you fetch food from the village?"

"Certainly, Your Grace. Should you like me to lay a fire for the lady?"

"That would be most kind," Cordelia said. "I should also like to wash."

"Food first, Harris. I'll take care of the lady."

A twinkle sparkled in the older man's eye as if he were perhaps not as cracked as he seemed. "I'm sure ye will, Your Grace."

Jack cleared his throat and started for the stairs, gesturing for Cordelia to proceed before him.

With a surprisingly bounding step, Cordelia headed up the stairs.

Jack's gaze followed the swing of her hips as she ascended, that mysterious feeling still very much alive within his chest. And as she reached the landing and glanced back over her shoulder, a cheeky smile dimpling her cheeks, Jack wonder what the hell he had gotten himself in to. For he had the very bad feeling if he were not careful, the student would quickly become the master.

CHAPTER 17

Cordelia gripped the windowsill, leaned forward, and immediately fogged up the pane. Scowling at the offending mist, she rubbed it off vigorously and resumed ogling her husband.

His jacket was off and his shirt was open at the neck. . . And he was pumping water most enthusiastically into wood buckets. She could only assume they were for her bath, but then in one astonishing move he dunked his entire head into a full bucket.

As he whipped his head back up, water flew everywhere and his hair tumbled about his head, liquid ink and the remaining water dampened his shirt, plastering it to his chest.

My God.

Cordelia had felt those muscles, but she had never been quite so intimately acquainted with the way they moved or their sculptural quality.

The impulse to bite him danced in her head and she gasped at her own audacity. How could one wish to bite another person? But she did, and oh that was not all she wished. Her breasts grew tight and, much to her own shock, her nipples hardened beneath her frock. She drew in slow breaths, desperately trying to understand the present feelings ruling her body.

Just as he was about to resume pumping, he looked up.

For one moment, their eyes met. And then, he reached down to his waistband, pulled out his shirt and yanked it over his head.

Cordelia leaned forward and banged her nose against the windowpane.

A laugh poured from him, thundering along the small courtyard. Instantly, Cordy pulled back from the window. A mixture of discomfort, humiliation, and her earlier excitement making her usually quite reliable nerves as reliable as rival tribes killing a sheep together and making merry.

She crossed over to the fire, trailing her fingers along the simple yet beautifully carved mantel. The fire generated a glorious warmth and she let out a sigh. Perhaps if she stood here for a solid hour she might feel some of the similar heat she had felt her whole life traveling from one ancient site to the next.

Or perhaps. Her eyes swung to the bed, her heart pounding in her chest. Perhaps, *he* could warm her.

That thought seemed to freeze any other threads of thought traipsing through her head. She stared at the thick, dark blue coverlet. She stared so long and hard her eyes began to burn. She understood the rudimentary ideas of lovemaking of course. Kathryn had intimated that the relations between a man and a woman could be quite pleasant, but from all the animal matings she had witnessed, her critical and fact seeking mind had difficulty accepting this. However, she couldn't deny that the feelings brought to bear in her body whenever Jack was near were deliciously pleasurable.

The door swung open, breaking her reverie.

Jack, still delightfully damp, strode into the room, carrying two large buckets, one of them steaming. He carried them as if they weighed no more than pillows filled with down.

Harris followed behind, a copper hipbath over his shoulder.

Cordy stood to the side, resisting the urge to manage their labors and bit back a smile as Harris scooted to the fire, keeping his eyes askance. He plunked the tub down, then scuttled out of the room acting as if he might be turned to salt if he stayed any longer, mumbling about "sin and the temptations of Babylon."

"One would have thought he'd be used to Babylon by now," Jack said as he poured the steaming bucket of water into the hipbath and then followed it with most of the cold.

Cordelia frowned. "I assume much of Babylon has occurred here then?"

Jack tested the water with his fingertips, swirling them over the water in a most distracting way before he stood straight, his back tightening for a moment. "I shan't deny it. But there has also been a considerable amount of simple conversation, too."

Drawing in a shaky breath, Cordelia wondered at the sudden distress curling through her stomach. Why should she give a care? She knew the kind of man her husband was. In fact, his superior knowledge of the bedchamber was one of the reasons it had not been difficult to agree to one week with him.

He turned to her, an eyebrow arching in a seductive challenge. "Are you jealous?"

She lifted her chin and sniffed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Is it?"

She shifted on her feet, forcing herself to meet his gaze lest he think she was hiding her true feelings. "What?"

“Is it ridiculous?” he asked softly. “We are all jealous at some point.”

Folding her hands firmly together, she avoided the idea of claiming ownership of the man standing but a few feet from her. “You are not mine,” she pointed out. “How can I be jealous of what is not mine?”

He cocked his head to the side, his eyes growing suddenly languid. “What if I told you that I consider you mine?”

More heat, preposterous, most confusing heat coiled in her abdomen turning her legs to jelly. Drawing in a restorative breath she managed, “I would say you were delusional.”

Silently, he crossed to her and slid his hand to the nape of her neck. His fingers wove gently into her coiled hair. “Delusion is a damned fine thing at times.”

Her lips parted and she glanced up at him, wondering if this was it then. Would this be the moment where she lost her virginity? She’d waited so long. It was all she could do to recall that this was no dream.

But Jack slid his fingers over her neck then carefully he turned her so that her back faced him.

Cordelia’s eyes flared as he deftly began untying laces and undoing buttons. He knew her gown better than she did and, at this moment, she was quite glad. For it was stifling her. She wanted it off. She wanted his clothes removed as well. And she wanted all the time in the world to discover the mysteries of his body and how her body could interact with his.

In a matter of moments, her gown was naught but a pool of fabric on the floor and she stood in her chemise and stockings. Jack’s body was curved against her back, his power and presence enough to set her trembling with anticipation.

Carefully, he brushed a lock of hair from her neck, then so softly he almost might not have done it, he pressed a kiss to the curve where her throat met her shoulder. “I have wanted this since the moment I set eyes upon you,” he whispered.

Her eyes fluttered shut and she dropped her head back, letting it rest against his chest. She couldn’t speak. It wasn’t possible to tell him she felt the same, for she would never let herself be that vulnerable. But his soft proclamation was nearly her undoing.

Jack’s hands came to rest on her hips. Slowly, he drew her chemise up, sliding the fabric deliciously over her skin until he whipped it up and over her head so that she stood in nothing but slippers and stockings.

To her shock, he knelt down behind her and placed his hands on her waist. With a slight pressure to the curvature of her hips, he urged her to turn towards him.

Jack stared up at her, his face alight with what could only be termed as worship. Her heart hammered in her chest. No one had ever looked at her thusly. No one. Tears stung her eyes and out of sheer instinct, she tentatively held out a hand then wove it into his dark hair.

“You are beautiful,” he said gently.

And for once, by the way he beheld her, she finally believed it. A tear threatened to spill down her cheek, so she drew in a deep breath and said lightly, “You promised to show me.”

“So I did.” With that, Jack trailed his fingertips over her hips then down to her thighs, pausing to linger at the bows holding her stockings in place.

She waited for him to untie them, but instead, he leaned forward and kissed her hip. With deliberately delicate kisses, he made his way down her thigh and hovered over the bow. Then with shocking ease, he took the ribbon between his teeth and tugged.

The bow came free as did her stocking, which he rolled down her calf in agonizing degrees. Reverently, he removed her slipper and pulled her stocking off then tossed it, fluttering to the floor.

Cordy couldn't stop her legs from shaking ever so slightly at his onslaught of sensual touches. It was not what she had expected at all. Really, she didn't know what she had expected but certainly not this slow, sensual onslaught.

What ever would he do next?

He repeated the action with her other stocking. Once she stood naked before him, a wave of nerves whispered through her body. What if he did not care for what he saw? What if her reality did not live up to what he had desired?

As if he sensed her thoughts, he glanced up at her. “I am going to make love to you so often this week you shan't be able to walk.”

She gasped, not truly understanding what such a thing meant, but his voice alone was enough to evoke a desire so intense it was all she could do not to launch herself at him.

He stood, his body moving with a remarkable beauty. He took her hand in his and led her to the bathtub. “Let me take care of you.”

Inexplicably, she started to pull back.

The pressure of his hand on hers increased. “No one ever has, have they?”

She swallowed, a sense of panic taking over her desire.

“Cordelia,” he said gently. “What have you to lose by letting me take care of you?”

She wanted to cry out *everything!* But she would never tell him that. So, she stepped into the bath, the hot water spilling over her calves and she let out a sigh.

“Sit, love.”

Love. The way he said, so gentle, so tender. . . It did frightening things to her heart.

“Now, not next week,” he teased.

It was so strange following his commands. In all her life, ever since she was a little girl, she’d always done things on her own. And here she was, twenty-nine, following the behests of her *husband*.

No not her husband. She couldn’t think like that. Her *lover*.

So without further analysis of the vulnerability, bumblebrainedness, or possible negative outcomes of such actions, Cordelia decided to give over to her lover’s considerably more extensive knowledge of seduction and lovemaking.

Bending slightly, she braced her hands on the sides of the tub and lowered herself.

A deep sound of admiration emanated from Jack, and she glanced up at him. “Yes?”

“Venus. That’s what you are.”

Cordelia slipped and splashed down into the tub. Horrified at her lack of dignity, she snapped, “She was getting *out* of the bath.”

His lips trembled with mirth. “Yes, my darling. But at some point she had to get in. That was the moment to which I was referring.”

“Oh.”

He crouched down beside her. “Now, relax.”

She nodded absently, noticing that her skin had turned a most glowing shade of rose. Logically, she wished to attribute it to the heat of the water and yet she could not. “What are you about to do?”

“Must you question everything?”

“I do believe you asked me that before.”

“So, I did. Do you wish me to give you a book of my intentions?”

“Do you have one?”

With that, Jack cupped her chin in his palms and took her mouth in a devouring kiss.

Cordy’s eyes flared momentarily as his hot lips worked over hers in the most shockingly marvelous of ways. As her lids fluttered closed, she opened her

mouth to him. The moment his tongue slid into her mouth, her muscles relaxed. In fact, her body melted into one great, pliable being of desire.

He lifted his mouth. "Cease your questioning for just a few moments and enjoy."

Nodding half in agreement, Cordelia sighed.

With that, Jack took the sea sponge bobbing in the water and commenced to slowly drip warm water over her exposed skin.

Cordelia gasped and to her shock, her nipples hardened to twin points.

As if in answer to their call, Jack bent down and sucked one of the taut nipples into his mouth.

Cordelia arched against him, thrilling at the streak of desire coiling straight to the place between her thighs.

His hot tongue teased her breast mercilessly before he moved to her other nipple. Cordy dropped her head back against the rim of the tub and tried to allow herself to simply float on the river of pleasure to which he had introduced her.

Slowly, he took the sea sponge and gently rubbed it between her breasts then dipped it below the water line, tracing it over her hips. And then. . . then. . . He traced it over her lower belly.

He wouldn't, would he?

The sponge bobbed to the surface and she let out a sigh, one to which she could not surmise its nature. She couldn't truly wish him to be so intimate.

Oh yes, she did. She could still recall the events that had transpired in Kathryn's parlor.

Jack smiled then slid his *hand* between her thighs.

She snapped her gaze to him. He was watching her face and for some reason, that was far more powerful than any other motion he'd taken so far.

His fingers trailed gently over her upper thighs then slipped over her soft folds.

Cordelia was tempted to clamp her thighs tightly together but knew the futility of such an action. And she didn't wish to prevent her own pleasure, now did she?

Tentatively, she opened her legs further to him, letting her eyes speak her assent.

A slight smile teased the corners of his sensual lips and he circled his fingers over a spot she'd scarcely been aware of until she'd met him. A pang of torturous pleasure thrummed through her body and her mouth opened a little wider as she fought for breath.

Taking her actions as an indication to continue, he continued to circle his fingers, slowly at first then faster, increasing then decreasing the pressure until her back arched like a bow.

Ceaselessly circling, his slid one finger deep into her core and a cry of pleasure tore from her mouth as her world exploded into breathtaking sparks. And as wave after wave of pleasure trembled through her, she knew she'd found a very dangerous addiction. Because now, all she wanted was more.

CHAPTER 18

Good Christ he loved her hair. It had never occurred to him that the simple act of slipping it free of its pins and letting it cascade down over his hands could have been such an erotic act. But it had been. The way it had skimmed, coarse, strong, wild over his palms was remarkable.

Working the soap out of it was another fascinating set of events. The ropes of her damp hair had tangled over his hands and he'd longed to trail it over her breasts. Which of course he'd done.

Now, she sat wrapped carefully in a soft, thick linen before the fire, her long hair fanned out over her shoulders. He knelt behind her, carefully spreading it so that the heat from the flames would dry it.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Enjoying you."

"Well," she cleared her throat. "I would like to enjoy you too."

She was such a marvelous woman. So to the point. So unlike anyone he'd ever known. "You're not enjoying this?"

"I do not take well to sitting still for long periods of time. Though I do admit, it feels quite nice."

"Nice?" he teased, stroking his fingers through her hair.

"Yes."

That gave him pause. He was not accustomed to having his ministrations referred to as *nice*. "You have a problem with focusing?"

"Only when asked to sit still."

"Shall I give you something to do?"

She glanced back over her shoulder, a devilish grin lighting her face. "I know exactly what I'd like to do."

His heart slammed against his ribs. He couldn't recall the last time any woman had surprised him or, more importantly, held him so entirely captivated. He would do anything to please her.

Jack tightened his hold on her smooth hair, tugging her head slightly back so that her face was tilted towards his. No. Not anything. He couldn't give her his

heart. He was not yet that far gone. And he never could be. No one as worthy as Cordelia deserved to be bound to someone such as him.

“We only have one week,” she whispered.

“And?”

She blinked. “Don’t you feel we should make use of our time?”

Before he knew what he was saying, he countered, “You could always stay longer.”

Immediately, her eyes shuttered and she started to look away, but before he could lose her, he lifted his hand to her jaw line and held her still. “I merely wish to point out that you are the one who insists there must be a timeliness to our delights.”

“Don’t you find that exciting?” she asked with a surprising degree of brightness. “The fact that we know it must end?”

He didn’t know what he felt but he knew that if he didn’t make her his now, he would never forgive himself. So, he took the linen sheet in his hands and yanked it from her body.

Her eyes flared with shock but then she bit down on her lower lip, her gaze darting to his linen shirt. “What’s good for the goose. . .” And she grabbed fistfuls of his shirt.

Obliging, he lifted his arms and bent slightly forward. She whisked the shirt off him and then that oh so clever gaze, the one which could pin him to the wall or set his desires ablaze, devoured the naked planes of his chest.

“I have never seen—”

“I’m glad,” he said, his voice rumbling with a degree of possessiveness unfamiliar to him.

She stretched out a hand but hesitated as though her fingertips might burn upon his surface. “You have seen many women.”

“So, I have.”

She scowled. “It hardly seems fair that you should be glad of my ignorance.”

He clasped her hand with his then pulled her slowly towards him. “Perhaps you should not think of the fairness or lack of fairness.”

“What should I think on then?”

He paused. How to say what he meant? “That it is no happy thing, my experience.”

Her brow furrowed. “Pardon?”

He shook his head unable to explain, unwilling to mar their present with his past. “Now is not the time.”

“But you—”

He placed a finger over her soft lips. Truthfully, it would never be the time to discuss the way he had used and been used. He never wanted her to know the secret humiliation he'd felt as an object of so many women's pleasure. A walking dildo. And he was determined that before the week was out, she would love herself enough to never let herself be treated like an object. As he had done. He took his finger from her lips and asked, “Are you sure this is what you want? You and I?”

The crackle of the fire filled the silence and her answer came in the subtle shift of her body towards his. She knelt before him and placed her hands on his shoulders. “I want this.”

How he longed for her to say she wanted *him*. But for now, this was good enough. More than good enough. He clasped her in his arms, then lowered her to the floor, laying her gently atop the linens before the fire. Her blonde hair spilled across the white silk.

Gazing down at her body, Jack was seized by the sudden feeling that he was seeing a woman for the first time. Which, of course, was absurd. He'd seen more women than he could recall.

But in this moment, she was his first.

He sucked in a sharp breath, feeling a hint of fear for the first time that he could recall.

“Are you well?” she asked softly, staring up at him through a scorching gaze.

“*Well* doesn't even touch what I feel.” Lowering himself, he oh so gently slid his hand over her skin. Loving the way her body undulated to his touch, he barely skimmed her flesh, teasing it, sensitizing it.

She moaned when his fingers teased her nipples, a flirtatious, promising touch, but one that whispered away before she could arch into his palm.

A flush tinged her body and he loved it. He wanted to drive her out of her wits. To send his oh so intellectual Cordelia rolling on a sea of physical need.

Most of all, he wanted her to never forget that it was he and no one else who awakened her and that he had done so with adoration for her body.

Jack leaned back, gazing at her thighs and, at long last, he could bear it no longer. He teased his fingertips down, over her hip bones and brushed them over her thighs.

Shaking slightly, her legs parted for him.

He slid his fingers through the soft curls guarding her clitoris and Jack's eyes fluttered shut as he encountered her slick heat. Christ, how he longed to be inside

her. But not yet.

Delicately, he slipped his fingers over her swollen folds. And whilst he focused on her response, he bent down and took one nipple into his mouth.

She gasped with surprise and he smiled to himself. Sucking and twirling his tongue around the taut peak, he mirrored the action with his fingertips, circling and teasing over her tight little nub. He was careful, waiting to see which strokes pleased her the most.

Cordelia grabbed on to his shoulders, her nails digging into his flesh. "Please," she breathed.

"Please what?"

She licked her lips. "Make love to me."

His chest squeezed with a pang of emotion. One he refused to contemplate. So, he kissed her, taking her mouth with his. While she clung to him, he parted her thighs a little further and rested his weight gently atop her body.

She tensed and pulled away from their kiss. Frowning, she glanced at his body atop hers. "Are you sure this is right?"

Jack glanced down their bodies, curious as to what could possibly be amiss. He smiled, a bemused grin. "I do believe so."

A bright blush spread over her already flushed cheeks. "Well, it doesn't look like. . ."

Jack stroked back a lock of hair from her face. "Like what?"

She rolled her face to the side, staring into the fire. "Like what I've seen," she mumbled.

That stopped Jack. Resting his weight on his forearms, he stared down at his wife, marveling that they were discussing such a thing. And yet, he wouldn't wish himself anywhere else in the world at this moment. "What have you seen exactly?"

She cleared her throat.

"Cordelia?"

With a great sigh she whipped her gaze back to his. "The donkeys if you must know."

A laugh boomed out of him.

"You needn't laugh."

"Laughter is the balm of all things."

"Yes but not—"

"When better than making love?" he said softly, wishing to ease her embarrassment.

She arched a brow but then her face creased with curiosity. “Do we really not do this with you behind?”

His mind went momentarily blank at the thought. “We will, love. But not this time.”

“I see. So there is more than one option for lovemaking?”

Jack grinned down at her, his heart ridiculously warm for the woman beneath him. “I will show you them all if you wish.”

“All?” she mouthed.

He nodded. “But let us start with the first one first.”

“Very reasonable.”

“I’m glad you think so.”

She nodded. “I am a rather precocious learner however.”

“I’m sure you are,” he agreed.

“So, if you wished to begin at a more advanced—”

“Cordelia?” he cut in gently.

“Yes?” She stared up at him, wide eyed.

“Are you nervous?”

Her lips clamped together. And that was more than answer enough. His fiery, prim woman would never admit to being nervous, but she might do everything in her power to distract him from her fear. “I promise if you do not like it, I will stop.”

“I understand it can be painful.”

Jack fought the urge to gape. Who in God’s name had taught her about love? Apparently someone who used the words *close your eyes and think of England*. “Do you trust me?”

She blinked.

The impulse to pull away, raked through him, but he realized the idiocy of such a feeling. She had no reason to trust him. Not yet. “Do you trust that I give women pleasure?”

An odd expression crossed her features then she nodded.

“Then trust I will do everything I can to make this pleasurable.”

To his shock, tears glistened in her eyes. The sight nearly undid him and he was very close to calling the whole damned thing off when she said, “What if I am bad at this?”

Was that what was causing her chatter? Jack cupped her cheek in his palm. “That is not possible.”

“Why?” she demanded.

Of course she would ask why. He had to give her a good answer. A true one or she would never trust him. "Because you are a remarkable woman who is always frank in her opinions and a woman like you, a woman who can speak her mind, will always be a remarkable lover."

"In truth?" she breathed.

He nodded. And it was true. A woman who could speak her mind wouldn't be afraid to say what she disliked or what she enjoyed. "Shall we try?"

"Oh yes," she urged, her excitement returning.

Jack rested his cock at her still slick core and teased the head along her folds. Carefully, he teased her clitoris again.

As he rubbed back and forth, barely letting his cock touch her opening, she held on to him, pulling her body up against his.

Just as she let out a cry of frustrated need, Jack rocked the head of his cock against her opening.

Her eyes flared wide and as soon as he felt her body adjusting to his size, he eased deep into her core. Her body protested for a moment and she winced.

"Are you all right?" he asked, his voice rough with desire and the difficulty of keeping himself in check when all he longed to do was drive home and claim her.

CHAPTER 19

Cordelia couldn't believe that her body could actually function like this. In fact, she could scarcely believe or think anything at all. Her brain had disappeared, replaced by sheer physical sensation.

She held on to his muscled shoulders, her fingers sliding into the indents of his carved musculature, and his strong chest brushed against her breasts. Her entire body seemed too long to make itself one with his.

Jack rocked his body against her, which sent her hips rocking in turn, desperately trying to claim more of him.

The pain was already gone and she wanted more. She had no idea how she could possibly take more but she did, indeed, want it.

Letting out a deep moan of pleasure, Jack lowered his head and kissed her, thrusting deep.

Her eyes flared at the deep and miraculously welcome intrusion. Instinctively, she lifted her legs and locked them about his waist.

She'd been certain she couldn't possibly feel any more pleasure. She'd been mistaken. With each stroke of his hard shaft within her body, she was tossed to a newer height until she was sure she would shatter.

And then Jack's hips moved in just such a way that the spot he'd touched and driven her wild with was touched again. And her world did indeed shatter. There was no way to codify the ecstasy coursing through her body.

He bucked against her and an impassioned sound tore from his lips. It was the most satisfying sound she'd ever known.

Cordelia's heart began to slow, but she didn't wish to let him go. Arms linked about his neck and legs around his waist, she wanted to stay like this for a thousand years. With him, deep inside her body, their bodies close, and no society anywhere near to tell them what was right or wrong.

Jack pressed a soft kiss to her lips then started to roll to his side.

She shook her head. "No."

"No?" Bracing himself on his forearms, Jack gazed down at her, his eyes fairly glowing with languor.

"I like you right there."

“Aren’t I heavy?”

She arched a brow at him as if to say, *please*.

“Right.” He laughed softly. “No delicate flower here.”

Cordelia tapped him on the shoulder lightly then impulsively, she lifted her head and bit him lightly on the same spot.

A groan rumbled from his throat. “You are going to be trouble.”

“I suppose I am, aren’t I?” She grinned up at him, unable to hide how delicious she felt.

In one powerful motion, Jack rolled onto his back, swinging her up to sit atop him. “Do you like riding?”

She frowned, wondering why in God’s name he would discuss equestrian pursuits at such a time. “Well, occasionally. . .”

And then he lifted his hips off the floor, his cock still inside her. She gasped. “You know,” she whispered. “I will have to pursue it.”

He smiled. “Yes, but not now.”

“Why—”

“One must walk before they run.”

She blew out a breath. “Preposterous. I should say I walked very well.”

He lifted his hand and stroked his fingers along her cheek. “Indeed you did. But I don’t wish to hurt you.”

She frowned. Could he possibly be concerned about such a thing? “I am made of strong stuff, I assure you.

Jack sat, embracing her. “I have no doubts. But I wish to care for you and not be a total cad.”

“I like it when you’re a cad,” she said, unable to resist the happiness bubbling inside of her.

He peered up at her through stunned eyes. “You do?”

“I do.”

“I thought you found me morally reprehensible.”

“Oh, I do,” she said with mock seriousness. “But moral reprehensibility has a most welcome time and place.” She stroked her hands over the muscles of his remarkable chest. “Such as now.”

Jack smiled. “I say sustenance is just the thing now. I mustn’t neglect your other needs.”

She blushed. “I am hungry.”

“There, you see.”

She leaned down, allowing her lips to linger just above his and whispered, "For you."

He wrapped his arms around her. "You do learn fast."

"I had made you aware of it."

He groaned. "So you did."

It was strange. She'd decided to throw herself into this one week. She didn't know how to do things in half measures. Yet, he didn't seem to be behaving in a similar fashion. "Are you not pleased?"

He let out a sigh. "Darling girl—"

"Don't," she said tightly, pulling out of his grasp, sitting upright.

"What?" he asked, apparently bewildered.

She forced herself to stay atop him, to not suddenly pull entirely away. "Speak to me like that."

He raised himself up on an elbow. "I don't understand."

"Let us continue to be honest with each other as we have done." She started to fold her arms across her naked middle but realized how silly that was. Instead, she forced herself to be bold and she rested her palms against his warm chest. "Something is wrong and now you are trying to placate me with rakishness."

He quirked a brow. "I thought you liked my rakishness."

She shook her head. "Not when you are trying to manage me."

That cheeky grin of his faded and he looked away. "I apologize."

"Thank you." She drew in a steadying breath, trying not to feel apprehension. "Now what is it?"

"It's something that hadn't occurred to me until just now but happens to most their first time." He met her gaze, his face far more serious than she'd ever seen it. "I don't wish for you to confuse passion for. . ."

"Love?" she tested, her throat surprisingly tight.

He gave a curt nod.

She forced a light laugh from her throat. "Good sir, love would interfere with my rather important plans."

He nodded again, but to her surprise he didn't appear particularly relieved. "Of course," he said.

She traced a finger along his lower lips, determined to reassure him that she was not trying to catch him. "Plans which do not include you."

He bit the tip of her index finger lightly then released. "Of course."

And that damned feeling returned to her. Of being afraid of appearing defeated or seen as less than composed. It was imperative she be seen as in

control. So, pasting a smile to her lips she lifted her hips, amazed at the strange empty feeling of him sliding out from her body, still quite hard.

It felt wrong, the separation.

To her surprise, her thighs felt weak and he grabbed her before she could wobble. "Are you in a rush?"

She let out a laugh, covering her clumsiness. "I didn't realize I could be so lightheaded."

He wagged his brows. "I do have a tendency to do that."

"As does lack of food," she drawled. "Shall we?"

With that, she hurried to her feet. "I think I shall need to bathe again quickly."

"Take your time," he said, standing. "I shall bring us food."

She shook her head. She needed to acquire distance from him and spending the rest of the day lounging and eating in this room seemed a terrible idea. "Let's dine alfresco."

He scowled. "Outside?"

She grinned. "Absolutely."



Jack tried not to gawk at his wife as he attempted to squash down the return of his consternation. The woman was an undeniable puzzle.

Somehow, between Cordelia, Harris and his own commandeered labors, lunch and all its accoutrements had been toted halfway across the estate. . . To find the perfect spot.

A spot she had actually found.

If possible, he didn't think there could be a more ideal vista on these particular grounds. The ocean was at a perfect distance. Close enough to hear the crashing of the waves, but far enough so that the wind didn't come tearing at them. And it was perfectly calm today as if she had ordered it to be so.

The ground upon which their table had been set was perfectly flat, nary a shake in the balance of the legs. And the sun was to their right, perfectly traveling at a pace that would not shine in their eyes.

Now, the table was covered in a pale linen cloth and filled with sprigged plates, silverware, and more food than the King might eat in a sitting.

He was still uncertain as to how he had been laden down with three chairs and one small folding table.

Harris, poor sod, had borne it all manfully, carrying a teapot, the tea box, milk, sugar, and two bottles of white wine, one of which was already on the table. The other, they would apparently chill in a stream for later. How she knew there would be a stream, Jack didn't know.

She had been adamant there would be one.

And lo and behold, as if she had manifested a trickling brook from her exacerbating, vivid imagination, she found one not far from their dining spot. The wine was chilling.

And she?

She was laying the last touch to the elaborately set table. She had picked a small bunch of purple wild flowers. She adjusted the small bunch, turning it a trifle to the left then looked up, her eyes alight with her achievement. "There. Now, isn't that civilized?"

He was tempted to point out that it had been civilized *inside*. But he was aware that such a comment was common to the male who inevitably ended up sleeping alone or paying light o'loves. "It's quite something."

He stared at the table, wondering if she would have done the same for him on the continent, armies milling about, not a chicken to be found, and a general irritation at having slept in the mud for a good decade or more dominant. He had the strangest feeling that she would have. "You would have made an excellent batman."

She cocked her head to the side, but then her lips curled in her devilish grin. "I would have, wouldn't I? Quail egg?" she asked, plucking up one of the speckled ovals from the woven basket on the corner of the table.

He eyed the thing as if it might poof out of sight. Surely she was a magician and not just simply organized. He refused to believe that she was, though all she did indicated her skill. He didn't wish to contemplate why he didn't like it. . . Perhaps. Perhaps, it rested in the general idea that such a woman would never need a man except for in the bedchamber. "Yes, I would."

He stepped forward and pulled out one of the folding chairs and waited for her to sit.

She did so, hands folded in her lap as she waited.

Jack sat opposite and, much to his shock, Harris shuffled forward and then snapped the napkin off Cordy's plate, placing it delicately in her lap. She gave him a gentle smile. "Thank you."

Harris blushed, tugged at his forelock and shuffled back without assisting Jack with his napkin. Not that he needed assistance, but...

“Harris, would you check the Sauternes?” she asked.

Harris’ eyes lit up, clearly glad to be given a task by the lady he was coming to admire, and he quickly shuffled off in the direction of the stream.

How in the hell had she done that? She’d known Harris less than twenty-four hours and the man was already ready to walk to land’s end and back for Cordelia. But then again, hadn’t he swung from a tree to free her? What was it about Cordelia that inspired men to act the fool?

Even his brother had shown a surprising interest in her. Jack stopped. That was not a thought worth thinking on. What was worth thinking on was that this woman, if given her way, would be able to have any man she wanted. And soon.

He didn’t like it.

Cordy peeled a quail egg, sprinkled a touch of salt on the smooth white then popped it into her mouth. Her eyes widened with delight. Her whole damned face glowed. From her shining blue eyes to the pink of her cheeks she looked. . . Well, she looked like a well-pleasured woman. And her hair. Good God. It rioted about her face in the slight breeze, a curly mass of unruly temptation.

He suddenly wished he’d learned to plait hair. Perhaps his groom could teach him and then he would spend hours brushing and touching Cordelia’s curls.

“I say, are you quite all right?” she asked, one brow arching.

He cleared his throat. “Quite.”

“You look as if you’ve choked but you haven’t eaten anything.”

“So I haven’t.”

She glanced towards the hillside and stopped chewing.

He followed the direction of her gaze and tried to spot what had riveted her attention. There was nothing but green grass rolling over the undulating ground. “What do you see?”

She picked up another egg, her gaze still trained in the distance, as she peeled the shell, her lips pursed and once again she popped the whole egg into her mouth. When she’d finished chewing, her gaze narrowed. “I’m not sure.”

He looked from his wife to the far off grass. “Not sure about what?”

Her gaze narrowed and she leaned forward, plunking one elbow most indecorously upon the table. “Could be.”

He leaned forward. Wondering what in the hell could cause such a reverie. “Could be what?”

She made a small contemplative sound then rubbed her chin. “Unlikely though.”

He was tempted to wave his hand in front of her face in farce fashion, but refrained. “Cordy?”

Ignoring him completely, she leaned forward, gaze still fixed in the distance. “But you never know.”

He drummed his fingers on the tabletop, the sound muffled by the linen. Being ignored was certainly unique. He was not impressed. And he was not impressed with himself that he was irked. “Know what, exactly?”

“It does look possible.”

“Have I been to bed with a mad woman?”

A smile suddenly turned her lips in triumph. “Yes, of course.”

He pulled back. Oh God. She’d lost her mind. He’d heard some women took lovemaking in such a fashion but she hadn’t seemed delicate in any particular way. “Now, my darling—”

But before he could begin to soothe her, she’d jumped up, her chair thudding on the ground and she was off, striding in a most alarming fashion. Off towards whatever spot had captivated her.

When she was about a good twenty feet away, and he was still agape, she called back over her shoulder. “Bring the bottle and the eggs.”

Had she just beckoned him?

Like a footman?

It was not possible.

Was it?

She kept striding and upon the breeze he heard her call with a surprising degree of impatience, “Well, come on then.”

And for lack of anything better to do, and the fact that she seemed delirious, he grabbed the bottle off the table and the small basket of eggs and went after his wife.

CHAPTER 20

Cordelia clapped her hands together and marched over the terrain. Anticipation hummed through her with such intensity it was all she could do to keep from running about the small circular area.

She was correct. It did look like it.

It truly did. Almost without question, they had been dining not twenty yards from a barrow. Doing a little dance of glee, she laughed.

In all her years, she'd never been to England until now and the Fates had been kind enough to bestow an excavation site upon her. Perhaps England wasn't so terrible after all.

The indentations and curve of the earth clearly indicated human creation, not geological occurrence. That fact made her fingers itch to find a shovel and a set of brushes in varying sizes.

Jack strode up behind her, his face not at all elated.

In fact, his face looked rather like doom. She'd seen a similar look upon her own father's face when her mother had been up to something particularly crack-brained. And she didn't like the idea of stirring about any of the emotions her mother had done.

That woman had caused more chaos than Pandora and Cordelia had spent a lifetime of living quite rationally, thank you very much.

"Whatever is the matter?" she asked. She gestured towards the barrow. "Is it not wonderful?"

He scowled. "It's a hill."

It hit her then. He had absolutely no idea what she was so overjoyed by. "You poor man."

"Poor man?" He readjusted his hold on the wine bottle and quail eggs. "I am perfectly in my right mind but you—"

"It's a barrow," she exclaimed then threw out her arms facing the small oval rise, wishing she could hug the burial site.

"A barrow," he echoed.

She nodded, then clasped her hands before her in a slightly prayerlike fashion. For there was nothing like a good dig, aside from rocks of course, which

could induce the desire to worship within her. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"I do not see a barrow."

Her mouth dropped open, quite unexpectedly. "I beg your pardon?"

He paused for several moments, his gaze swinging from her to the barrow then back again. "Are you quite well?"

"Hmmpf." She dropped her hands, propping them on her hips. "Don't be ridiculous—"

"I know you are given to eccentricities, but you are acting in a most peculiar —"

She narrowed her eyes, quite disappointed in his lack of vision. "You sound most serious. Like a poker has invaded your posterior."

Jack frowned. "Now, that hardly seems appropriate."

She laughed. "Listen to yourself."

He scowled and then his expression softened to one of chagrin. "I do sound rather—"

"Stiff," she cut in, more than ready to get down to business. "Now just look before you."

His gaze traveled over her warily, very much with the same sort of look one might use when expecting a madman to suddenly start jumping up and down and make monkey noises.

She sighed. Why did men always have to be so ridiculous? They always had to jump to conclusions and rarely thought out their situations. "If you would just be patient and look at the terrain you will see what I see."

"I do not believe a barrow is magically going to appear, my dear."

She rolled her eyes. "If you are speaking of the garden variety, which I now assume you must be, I concur."

His brows drew together, confusion written all over his face. "If not—"

"Look," she commanded pointing towards the rise.

He looked.

He stared.

He blew out a pained breath.

She dropped her hand and shook her head. "Good grief, what do they teach boys at Eton?"

"Not much," he drawled.

"Apparently." She folded her hands before her, ready to take on the polite persona she always managed when irritating gawkers came to view the antiquities of Egypt. He was quite fortunate she was willing to enlighten him,

really. Usually, she just shooed such persons off. But...Well. . . She was a guest here.

"I'm waiting," he said at last.

"With little grace," she quipped.

"Cordelia—"

"All right. All right." She cleared her throat and straightened her shoulders. "What you see before you could be a Viking barrow."

His dark eyes widened slightly as he stared at the green patch with fresh eyes. "Viking—"

"Yes. Now let me finish."

He clamped his mouth shut, but his impatience needed no words to be expressed. The line of his broad shoulders, and usually sensual mouth, said all that needed speaking.

"About a millennia ago, the coasts were riddled with Viking attackers. London itself—"

"I am familiar with history, madam professor."

She sniffed. "Not familiar enough."

Jack sighed, put the eggs down then popped the cork from the wine bottle. "I beg your pardon, but I think if you are going to lecture, this calls for wine."

She gave a little conciliatory gesture with her hand. "Do go ahead."

"Thank you." He took a swig from the bottle then offered it to her.

"In a moment. When I'm finished."

He held the bottle a few inches from his mouth before saying, "Will it truly be only a moment?"

She tsked. "Desist in your irascibility."

At this, he grinned, apparently mollified by the wine. "You really are quite a picture when you are in such a state."

"I am not in a state," she huffed.

"You are."

She hmphed again. "Now. To continue."

He wagged his brows then drank from the bottle once again.

"Many Viking warriors died in this country and they were frequently buried here in elaborate graves under the earth."

"How fascinating."

"Yes. It is really. . ." She stopped. "I say, are you making fun?"

"Of you, love?" He shook his head, pursing his lips in exaggerated seriousness. "One should never dare to do such a misdeed."

She lifted her chin again. "Indeed, they should not."

He gestured with his own hand, a suspiciously similar movement to her own earlier gesture. "Do go on."

"As I was saying, these Viking burials are key to understanding their role here in the establishment of our society, and most certainly in understanding the vast travel and trade that the Northmen partook in."

"So, there's an ancient plunderer buried on this land."

"Exactly."

"Any treasure do you think?"

She was tempted to scoff, but held in such thoughts. It was to be expected in one who was not an academic. "It is impossible to tell what objects are buried in the barrow. And it also largely depends on your idea of treasure."

"I suppose one might consider anything buried for such a long time treasure. Especially if it is indicative of a society's makeup."

Her heart warmed. The words which he'd uttered seemed impossible. No one. Absolutely no one besides her brothers or her father had ever uttered such a sentiment. Her cheeks began to burn with happiness. "You understand," she said.

He held out the bottle of wine to her. "I understand that it is important to you and that history is just a few feet beneath the soil before us."

Cordelia swallowed.

"What's important to you is important to me," he said softly.

She took the bottle of wine and lest her eyes grow watery, she took a quick drink, savoring the crisp, sweet notes of peach and apple. She had no idea what to make of such a statement. She and her family had held the importance of archaeology in mutual esteem.

Jack had no reason at all to feel thusly. And from his words, his consideration had only to do with her opinion on the matter.

It was a rare feeling.

She took another drink, overwhelmed by the realization that someone might put her desires in a place of importance without her having to do a good deal of cajoling. "I appreciate that. Thank you."

"You're happy, aren't you?" he asked, a surprising degree of happiness in his own voice.

She handed him back the bottle of wine. "I am. Yes."

He leaned towards her, and brushed his thumb over her lower lip then licked the drop of wine he'd removed. "Then there's really only one thing to do."

The flushed feeling raced over her entire body, skin aflame, and lips parting.
“What is that?”

Leaning in, he pressed his lips to her ear and whispered softly, “We dig.”

CHAPTER 21

*I*t had never occurred to Jack that there were varying sizes of shovels or that one might use them in a variety of ways. Well, he must have known at some point. Of course he knew. He'd been in the army after all. And while he'd never dug, he'd seen it done. Officers didn't dig unless something as dire as rat eating had commenced. Not if the men were going to follow orders. But Cordelia had thrust a shovel in his hands, pointed at the grass covered dirt and marched off to talk to her *foreman*, John Upton.

She'd quickly taken the shovel away with a yelp of dismay when she'd realized he'd made a total hash of things. Apparently, she'd assumed that all men knew how to wield a shovel. She'd been mistaken.

But who knew there was a science to digging? Surveying? Certainly. But digging? According to Cordelia there was and she'd sent him off with a village boy to cordon off the whole area with sticks and white string.

Since just yesterday and its discovery, the barrow was a mulling, busy place.

For her, he'd hired in a few workers. And she'd taken to it with the sort of zealotry one expected from parliamentarians blathering for the majority.

He'd never seen anyone so. . . So . . . Happy. And last night had been perfect bliss, making love until all hours, listening to her discuss her plans for the site. He'd never imagined that he could be so content in a woman's company. Content didn't cover it, really. Cordelia was indescribable in her enthusiasm for him and for her life.

It was far from what he ever would have expected for his one week with his wife, but he had to admit that there was a feeling in his chest which did resemble. . . Happiness. He'd no idea what to make of it and so when Cordelia gave him a set of small brushes, he didn't complain, but rather followed her bustling form to an area that had been dug out.

Her blonde hair was twisted atop her head, but several curls had fallen out, brushing the nape of her neck and everything about her was completely alive. All the women he knew spent their time cultivating ennui. Ennui didn't stand a chance next to Cordelia's potent excitement.

“Now,” she began, leaning forward and gesturing with her hand, though she didn’t touch the earth. “You can see the bow of the boat.”

He peered closer attempting to see the boat. He peered again.

She laughed, a delightful, infectious sound which very nearly curled his toes with the desire to toss her over his shoulder and head for a bush.

Later. That would be for later. Now, he wished to give his full attention to what gave her so much pleasure.

She smiled at him. “You don’t see it, do you?”

“No.”

She wagged her brows and whipped out a brush about the size of the one in his shaving kit.

He eyed it dubiously. “Are you serious?”

“Most definitely.” With that she began whisking slowly at the slightly moist, dark soil. It fell away in little crumbles and waterfalls.

“Would it not be faster to use something larger?”

“It would, but the risk is too great. Some of the idiotic Europeans that have come to Egypt take no heed of preservation. None at all.” Her eyes sparked with fury. “They blast away at the ancient sites for bits of gold. It’s disgusting.”

He listened while she continued to work patiently, her brow slightly furrowed. “So, you work slowly to ensure the artifacts are maintained.”

“Precisely. You never know what you might find.”

“Like a small bead off a cloak or a dropped coin.”

Her hand stilled and she stared up at him, her mouth parting slowly. She let out a contented sigh. “Exactly.”

That one look slammed through him with a terrifying intensity. That gaze spoke volumes rendering him a position of superiority. He felt it. In her eyes, that somehow he’d not only come up to snuff, but far exceeded anything she might have ever hoped for.

And then she said it. That dreaded thing that had been said to him time out of mind.

“Why do you waste yourself on petty nothings, Jack? You’re far too clever for all of that.”

A muscle clenched in his jaw. His entire body locked up in point of fact. A lifetime of criticism recollected by her simple question. “I am not petty. And I don’t consider my life a waste.”

“No. Of course you’re not. You’re a very good man. I simply meant—”

The good humor, which had been ruling Jack, turned to ash in his mouth. Every muscle in his body seemed to go cold. What was he doing here with her? Playing with her? Assisting her in this ludicrous operation, pretending as if they would be friends once she had her annulment. Once she was gone. She didn't want him. Hell, she probably didn't even *like* him. She was going to leave him as soon as she could and any sort of happiness he'd allowed himself with her would be a bitter memory. Another memory to remind himself that he had not been worthy of someone like her. "I—I'm going back to the house."

"But we're about to uncover—"

"I don't feel particularly well," he said, hating his own sudden peevishness. Christ. He was petty. A petty child. Just like his father had always insisted. He'd known it. It was why his grandmother ran everything. He'd refused to let his own failings ruin the dukedom but to hear the words from Cordelia was damned painful.

"If you don't feel well then you must go back." Though her voice was soft, there was an edge to her gaze, a sort of impatience as if she was realizing that the temporary flicker of approval she'd felt for him had been a mistake.

It had been a mistake. And the sooner she realized such a thing the better for both of them. He was for her sexual pleasure and nothing else. He never would be useful to her for anything else. "I'll see you this evening."

"As soon as the light fades."

He started to stride away, his boots thudding against the dug up ground and he hesitated. He was being a total fool. Of course, she enjoyed his company. And though he'd never been friends with a woman, there was nothing to stop his current attempt just because he might not live up to her high expectations.

He turned back about to call out to her but she was completely absorbed in her work. Oblivious to his presence. Oblivious to the lack of his presence. It was a brutal moment as his heart spasmed in his chest. She didn't truly care that he was going back to the house. Worst of all, he cared that she did not.



Jack strode into the house, his mood as black as thunder, only to be met with the deep, rolling laugh of another man and the higher, delighted peals of a young woman.

Who the Devil?

He glanced at the closed parlor door, considered hesitation, then cast the notion aside. He threw open the door.

A young woman sat on the settee near the fire, her head slightly back, red curls tumbling about her shoulders, her face flushed. Her skirts were fluffed out about her and from under the hem peeped a pair of large, shining boots with massive, silver spurs.

Sounds of enjoyment emanated from under the voluminous folds of the skirts.

There was only one man who would wear such outlandish shoes. . .

“Aston!” Jack roared, his patience gone.

The sounds of masculine contentment paused.

The young woman’s eyes snapped open and she let out a shriek of dismay.

A large hand reached out from under the hem, grabbed it and swept the fabric up just enough for the Duke of Aston to stick his head out from underneath. His long, dark hair was in a riot about his swarthy, unshaven face. “My good man, I’m not finished. And a gentleman never leaves a lady without her denouement. So, if you will just shove off for a minute or two.”

“No, I will not shove off.” Jack ground his teeth together. He was in no humor for the outlandish, scandal riven duke who’d returned to England last year.

“Well, if you’d care to join then,” Aston said jovially. “I’m sure the young lady wouldn’t mind.”

The young lady in question laughed and batted her lashes at the prospect.

“No,” Jack retorted, curling his hands into fists. “There will no joining. There will be no denouement. You will hie yourself hence.”

Aston arched a single brow. “Who are you and what have you done with the Duke of Hunt?”

“Aston, I’m in no mood—”

“The Duke of Hunt that I know is always in a mood. In fact, the Duke of Hunt is a randy goat who’s happiest, bottle in hand, and lass upon his knee. So what the Devil’s happened to him . . . er. . . you?”

Jack frowned, suddenly unsure how to get rid of the man without divulging too many details. “I’m entertaining if you must know.”

Aston shrugged, the young woman’s skirts fluttering over her stockinged thighs. “We shall make a merry party then. Four is even better than two in my experience.”

It took every fiber of will Jack possessed not to stalk across the room and punch Aston. “You will touch no part of my wife,” he gritted, aware that he was about to make little sense. “If you meet her, you will then not think of her, and after that, you won’t look at her either.”

Aston pursed his lips. “Never mind all this looking and thinking. Could you say that again?”

“You will not lay your hands upon Cordelia. Not even in greeting. You will not—”

“No. No. No,” Aston cut in. “*Your wife*, say that bit again.”

Jack paused. He’d said his wife without even thinking. But she wasn’t. Not truly. “I misspoke.”

Aston pulled down the young woman’s skirts in one swift move, then jumped to his feet. He headed for the sideboard and grabbed a bottle of brandy. “One never misspeaks the word wife.”

Jack stood still, debating whether he should just turn and stride out of the room or whether he should stay and put his situation before the crack-brained duke who had spent a decade as a pirate, or privateer as the arrogant, old boy insisted.

Aston took a swig of brandy from the bottle then smiled at the young woman he’d been about to swive. “My dear girl, I am loath to leave you in the lurch, but *noblesse oblige* insists that I come to the aid of a fellow duke.” He offered her his hand then escorted her towards the door. “Will you mind if I delay the conclusion of our frolics?”

She smoothed her skirts then grinned up at Aston. “As long as we *frolic* several times.”

Aston lifted her knuckles to his mouth then nibbled.

Jack scowled. Usually such antics would be perfectly acceptable, enjoyable even, but not bloody well now.

As soon as the pretty piece had swept out of the room, Aston shut the door and blew out a breath. “She’s going to be the death of me. Morning. Noon. Night. The lass is insatiable. Indeed, I think she might even outpace—”

“Aston,” Jack cut in, “such details are not necessary.”

“You usually enjoy details.”

Jack let out a sigh. “Nothing in my life at present is *usual*.”

Aston extended the bottle of brandy. “Unburden yourself, my friend.”

Jack opened his mouth, about to do just that but then he stopped. “What the Devil are you doing here? You’re only an honorary member of The Dukes’

Club.”

“I met the Duke of Roth in Jamaica last month. Told him about the goings on with the Duke of Darkwell and his new wife and Roth insisted that if ever I was in need of a rendezvous, that I should bring my pretty bird to this place. I don’t think there is anything honorary about my membership anymore.”

Jack *hmmphed*.

Astoned brows rose, astonished.

Jack groaned then wiped a hand over his face. He’d never *hmmphed* once in his life. Not until he’d met Cordelia.

“Have a drink,” Aston ordered. “And tell me all about it. You’re clearly in dire straits.”

Jack wiped a hand over his face, groaning at the perversity of his situation. “I’m married.”

“I’d surmised that much.”

“To a damned infuriating woman,” Jack clarified.

Aston laughed merrily, “Aren’t they all?”

“Perhaps,” Jack agreed. “But this one is the queen of the infuriating women. The empress supreme. Divine goddess of them.”

Aston rolled his eyes. “Those are a great many titles.”

Letting out a sigh, Jack folded his arms across his chest. “My wife cannot be described without a veritable thesaurus of words.”

Taking a swig of brandy, Aston leaned against the fireplace mantel. “In my experience, women are nowhere near as complex as you seem to think your wife.”

Uncomplicated? Aston had no idea about the depths of his Cordelia. He could likely mine for decades and never find all the slivers of her personality. “For starters, she’s not in all true legality my wife.”

That seemed to grab Aston’s attention. “I beg your pardon?”

Jack leaned forward, speaking slowly, “She’s not actually. . .”

“Then why the Devil say so.”

There was little he could do but shrug and stare at the brandy bottle in longing. Still, getting foxed probably wasn’t the best plan at present. “It’s complicated.”

“Evidently.” Aston shook his head as if beset by woe. “How has this woman put you in such a state?”

How could he explain it? How could one explain how frustratingly glorious Cordelia was? “I’m in a *state*, as you put it, because she’s not for me,” he said

tightly. "Or more apt, I am not for her."

Aston let out a low whistle. "I see."

Clearing his throat, Jack looked away. "She's seeking an annulment. Our marriage isn't valid."

"So why all this moaning then?"

"I do not moan," Jack protested, snapping his gaze back to the pompous bag of wind.

Aston gave him a challenging stare.

"Well. . . perhaps a trifle," Jack conceded. "You see, I—I like her."

Aston took another long swallow, leaving the bottle half full, and yet the man stood quite solidly. Perhaps due to the mantel's solid foundation. "How can this possibly be a bad thing?"

Jack held his breath a moment, debating whether it was a wise course to discuss this with the wild duke. But then again, Aston had a pragmatic, if outrageous, view of the world. If anyone would listen without judgment it was Aston. "Because she's leaving," he managed.

"Then ask her to stay."

"It's not that simple."

Aston crooked a half smile. "Yes, it is."

"I will never be a good husband and she deserves one."

"Ah." Aston took another swig then gestured dramatically with the bottle. "That's a different game."

"Yes," Jack admitted.

"Well, if that's it." Aston gave a shrug that was suspiciously French. Perhaps all those years in the French Caribbean had had their effect because the man fairly exuded a jovial acceptance of life's foibles. "You know what must be done then."

Jack remained silent. Not wishing to hear the words let alone say them.

But Aston leveled him with a hard stare. "If you're not willing to come up to snuff, if you're not ready to be her husband properly, you can't ask her to stay. In fact, you bloody well need to make her go."

And there it was.

With every day that slipped by, Jack felt himself longing to ask Cordelia to take a chance on him. But he couldn't do that to her. Because he'd fail. As he had always failed. And breaking Cordelia's heart and dreams was something he could never allow himself to do. Not for anything. Not for anyone. Most certainly, not for himself.

Aston held out the bottle. “You better have a bloody drink. You’re going to need it.”

Jack lifted the half empty container to his lips and took a long, hard swallow. The burning liquid barely made it past the slight lump in his throat. He was going to do the right thing. He had to. And one day, even Cordelia would thank him for it.

CHAPTER 22

Cordelia clomped into the house, the light fading behind her and let out a sigh of contentment. Granted, the air was damp and her fingers had gone numb, even in summer, but she was delighted with the progress of the dig.

She ran a hand through her tangled hair, caught sight of herself in the hall mirror and let out a squeak of astonishment. A banshee stared back at her, hair a riot and earth smudges streaked her cheeks. Now, in Africa she'd never given two shakes about her appearance. One did not grow alarmed at burned skin, peeling fingers, or wild hair when one was uncovering the greatest antiquities the world had ever known.

One did grow alarmed however when one was supposed to be having a romantic tryst with a rake. Whatever would he think? No doubt he would be horrified. The women of his acquaintance could not move ten feet without ensuring their ensemble was still perfect or that each rebellious strand of hair had been tamed into its elaborate coifs.

Much to her dismay, she realized she cared. She shouldn't of course. Sensible, intelligent women, capable of taking care of themselves, which she more than excelled at thank you very much, did not rely upon the approval of a male to feel good about themselves.

But an undeniable little twist of concern snaked its way into her stomach. What would he think? Would he be amused as he seemed to be by all her unusual quirks or would this be too much even for a man such as him? Perhaps, she could sneak upstairs and have a quick bath before he—

“You’ve come back?”

That dark voice, delicious to its core, rumbled from the landing and she paused for a moment, determined that he should not see how intensely he affected her. “Did you fear I would not?”

He raised a dark brow. “With you, bandying about as you do, one can never tell.”

Cordelia blinked. An abrupt image of her father speaking to her mother in a cold voice, castigating her for spending too much time discussing painting with a

fashionable young artist that summer they spent in Paris resonated within her. “Is that an insult?”

He placed one hand on the banister, that masterful hand gripping the wood carelessly. “Now why would you say that?”

She swallowed. She was nothing like her mother. Nothing. “The tone of your voice, perhaps.”

“I think you are imagining things.”

She bit down on the inside of her lip, her insides building into a slow churn. Something was wrong. Terribly wrong. “I am not inclined to flights of fancy,” she said tightly.

“I have no wish to argue with you, Cordelia. It hardly seems necessary.”

Oh God. It was like being tossed back in time. Her mother growing impassioned, her father cold, logical, making her mother feel the fool. And the identification she felt with her mother was suddenly hellish. All her life, she’d agreed with her father. Her mother had been an emotional creature who simply needed to learn to control herself, but right now. . . Standing here, discussing simple turns of phrases with Jack, she saw how quickly one could twist a person by simply appearing superior, in control.

Is that what her father had done? And she had supported him, disdaining her mother and her emotional nature. And why in God’s name was this happening now? Everything had been going so well.

“I do not wish to fight either,” she said, tempering her tone. “But you seem out of sorts.”

There was a long silence, but in that silence a brittle tension filled the space between them. “You don’t know me very well. Consider that this is my true nature.”

“Of course.” She smiled tightly suddenly wishing she was anywhere but here. She had no idea how to converse like this or how to relate to the emotional tumult of an affair. “I do not presume to know you thoroughly, but—”

“Come upstairs.”

She blinked, shocked he’d cut her off, and shocked that his answer to their situation was for her to no doubt join him the boudoir. “Pardon?”

He shrugged lightly. “You’re a delightful mess.”

“A mess?”

“Yes.” His voice had taken on that deep, purr-like quality which indicated imminent seduction. “It would give me great pleasure to assist you in setting yourself to rights.”

But she didn't feel not right. Aside from the mysteries of the present conversation, she felt rather glorious, what with her find and the accomplishments of the day. However, said gloriousness was quickly diminishing as she began to see herself as he must. "What if I like my mess?"

A strange smile tilted his lips. "You enjoy being coated in soil?"

"Sometimes," she defended.

"Truly?"

"It means I've done a good day's work," she said firmly.

"I see."

There it was again, that cool superiority. She narrowed her eyes. "What is it exactly that you see?"

He drew in a slow breath, one which stretched the linen draped over his broad shoulders. "I see that you are becoming angry with me."

"No. I . . . Well, yes." There was no point in lying. "Yes I am."

"Why is that?" he asked, his voice still velvety soft as he descended the stairs, taking each step deliberately, his powerful legs tightening the fabric of his perfectly pressed, cream colored breeches.

"Because I think you wish I were different." She swallowed. Hard. Stunned to find that her limbs were shaking slightly. "That I was not who I am."

He stopped on the stairs, his gaze narrowing slightly until his dark eyes alit with a banked passion. "Why in God's name would you assume such a thing?"

"Because all the women you've know—" the words caught in her throat and to her horror, she couldn't finish.

"The women I've known," he prompted, clearly unwilling to second guess what she was about to say.

Which she was glad of, but she didn't wish to say the thoughts running amok, a myriad of thoughts completely foreign to her, through her head.

He again started coming down the stairs and when he stepped onto the hardwood floor and closed the distance between them, she could no more sort out what she was about to say than she could sit for an hour and forty-five minutes through a musical. But nonetheless he was waiting, gazing down at her from his intimidating height. Interesting, she'd never found his height intimidating before.

"Come on then, Cordelia," he urged. "What about the women of my acquaintance?"

"They're not worthy of you," she whispered.

Much to her horror he laughed. It was not a jovial sound, but a rumbling sort of mockery. “And you are?” he drawled.

Her shoulders drew back. “That was not what I said.”

“But it was what you implied,” he pointed out, an edge to his voice. “Perhaps, you, like so many before, are hoping to reform my condemned ways.”

“Why are you behaving like such an ass?”

His laughter dimmed. “Make no mistake, you’ve fallen under some girlish delusion.”

That bridled her. “I am hardly girlish or delusional.”

“You are both right now,” he said softly, but without mercy.

She squared her shoulders, determined not to appear shaken by this conversation. “Indeed?”

“You are girlish, half in love in your first affair, something I never thought would befall you, and you’re delusional in your ridiculous belief that there is something deeper to me than you have seen.”

“That’s not true,” she insisted. She wasn’t delusional about him. She couldn’t be. “The way you speak. The way you’ve helped Harris—”

He scoffed. “I help men like Harris to soften up women like you.”

“I don’t believe that.” And she didn’t. He just was determined to paint himself in a bad light. “You are good, despite all your protestations.”

“And my previous actions?” He cocked his head to the side as if mocking her. “Do they speak nothing? I thought you were a woman of logic.”

“Why are you doing this?” she asked, an unwelcome plaintive note to her own voice.

He swung his gaze away from hers. “Because your delusions are—”

“Stop.” How she longed to reach out to him but she couldn’t. She couldn’t risk such an emotional response. “That’s not why and—”

“Are boring.”

“Boring?” she repeated.

“Yes,” he said coldly. “This prim, proper, bluestocking act in which you are going to swoop in and save the rake from himself is *boring*.”

“I have hardly tried to save you.”

“But it’s started. Oh Jack, you’re a good man,” he mocked openly. “Next thing you know, you’ll be spouting how I never meant to hurt anyone, that it is I who was hurt.”

She pulled back. Stunned. “I think you’ve just said it yourself.”

He blanched. “Don’t be a fool.”

“You’ve accused me of acting thus. I might as well assume my part. And let me add that if you were as you said, you wouldn’t be warning me right now, or trying to brush me off. You’d have continued to use me until you were bored.”

He raised one brow, his lips forming a firm line. And as he cocked his head to the right, a look of supreme, cold arrogance altered his features into a man she didn’t know.

She gasped. Unable to believe what his silence was inferring. “You are bored with me?”

“What do you surmise?” he said flatly.

“I—I—” But she couldn’t form the next words to cut him dead as she so longed to do. “I see.”

“I am not an archaeological site, my lady. No matter how deep you dig, there is no hidden treasure to be found.”

Tears, horrible tears, which were an abhorrence to her, stung her eyes. “But I thought—”

“Were you falling in love with me?”

Her throat closed so tightly she could make no reply. Good God, the hideous answer was a resounding yes. Somewhere along the way, her logical heart had fallen for his droll wit, his sense of adventure, and the way he had, indeed, made her feel as if she were the most beautiful woman in the world.

He gave her a tight smile, one which was only slightly apologetic. “It does happen. So, best we end this now I think.”

Cordelia forced herself to draw in a slow breath. There was something at play here much larger than he was letting on. Everything had been more than she could ever have imagined between her and a man. Not only had he given her his body, he had given her something even more important. A piece of himself. She was sure of it. Now, she refused to let him take it away. “I don’t know why you’re doing this.”

A muscle clenched in his jaw and he looked away, staring off into the distance before he squared his shoulder and pinned her with an unyielding stare. “I told you. This. . . This experiment has grown dull.”

“I see.”

“I’m glad.”

The lack of emotion on his part was all too familiar. She’d used such a tool time and time again to protect her heart from anyone who dared to peer within. “I see that you are afraid. You are a coward afraid of his own heart.”

His gaze narrowed, his entire body bristling with tempered anger. “My lady, I have no heart to be a coward with.”

Cordelia was very tempted to haul back her fist and hit him. If only she could shake some sense into his thick skull, but she knew the futility of such fights. Always, her parents’ fights had descended into screaming and the throwing of objects. She wouldn’t do that. She wouldn’t give Jack the satisfaction. She would drive him into the ground if need be. She would have the strength her mother never had.

CHAPTER 23

Jack had never cared when a woman's lip had trembled with emotion in the past. He cared now. But it was not with the tragic sort of childish petulance that set Cordy's lip trembling.

Oh no. Her *entire* body trembled. . . with fury. Her passionate eyes sparked like lightning bolts in the middle of a sea storm and the energy about her had pooled into something deep and dangerous. She lifted her chin and a lock of her blonde hair tumbled across her forehead. Dashing it back, she said, "You have a heart as much as I."

His gut twisted with horror at what he knew he must do. At what he must say to end the doomed path he had set upon with her. He'd been such a fool to engage in such an affair with her, *his wife*, and now he had to play the thing out to the bloody end. And he hated himself. He would never be worthy of Cordelia. Never. And he had to give her the freedom she'd been so determined to have if he was to keep her safe from him. It's what an honorable man would have done from the beginning. "That isn't saying much is it?"

Her cheeks flooded with crimson. "I am not heartless."

"Aren't you?" The words were poison in his mouth, ripping up his tongue, contaminating his flesh. He longed to stop. To take her in his arms and explain that he could never be the man she needed. That he was incapable of living up to her expectations. His family knew. His father and even his grandmother, on occasion, had made that clear. If that weren't enough, the history of his own behavior had made that more than plain.

And he couldn't bear disappointing her.

He knew all too well the horrors of disappointing the ones one loved. Hadn't his father been ashamed of him his whole life? His entire life, the duke had looked upon him with disgust. Every time he'd been in his father's presence he'd felt the disgrace of being the failed son and heard the piercing words meant to teach him his lowly place. And he would now not perform the part of failed husband. Nor could he let her attach herself to someone who would just drain her happiness as he disappointed her.

So, he cast out any hesitance he felt at hurting her. If he did not hurt her now, he would make her life a living hell, living in the shadow of his inferior character. "You've lived your entire adult life as a virgin, unwilling to be touched, to be loved. I think you are exactly like me. Heartless. Without feeling. One who thinks of herself at all cost."

For a blessed moment, her gaze softened. "That's not who you are."

The small, barely living part of him that was good demanded that he assure her that she was the sun, the stars, that no one could ever touch her for her strength, beauty, and intelligence. But he couldn't do that. Not if for once, for her, he was going to do the right thing. "That is exactly who I am."

She propped her hands upon her hips, a defiant gesture. "You're insistent upon this course?"

He'd set himself upon it the moment he had stood upon the landing gazing down. "Yes."

"Fine then." She squared her shoulders, her chin lifting in that resolute way she had. "I will tell you what you so clearly long to hear."

A gaping well of dread formed in Jack's stomach. This was exactly what he desired, but for the first time in his adult life, having charged headlong into battles, faced angry husbands in duels, and drank until he couldn't stand, he felt a tinge of fear because he actually admired the woman standing across from him. And she was about to point out everything that was not admirable in him.

She ran her eyes over him, critical, assessing, once again as if he were an object in a glass case to be categorized and catalogued. "Jack Eversleigh, you have misused a great deal of your life."

He inhaled, relieved. Thank God. She was going to do exactly what he needed her to. Now, if she could just commit, she'd point out all the reasons why she needed to leave him and he wouldn't have to leave her.

Cocking her head to the side, she said without any seeming mercy, "At every turn, you have chosen the path that others do not."

He stood still, stoic under her words, allowing them to hit him, breaking familiar wounds open.

"You have turned your back on society as best you may and you have not lived up to your potential."

His breath caught in his throat. That last part. That last part didn't sound quite right. He didn't have potential. He never had. And he was never going to. That fact had been clear all his life, damn it. He opened his mouth ready to correct her but she would have none of it.

Cordelia rushed on before he could speak, “I don’t know when it occurred, but at some point you decided to be the one who took all the blame in your family.” Her face grew hard, angry, almost brittle, the words falling out of her mouth like rough stones. “I assume it has to do with your eldest brother’s death.” Here for one fleeting moment, those riotous eyes softened. “You took the blame, did you not?”

The sympathy in her gaze and the absurdity of her claims set his insides afire. What she was trying to do. . . Trying to lift him out of the mire, it was disgusting and futile. “It was my fault,” he gritted.

She threw back her head, an impatient breath huffing out of her. Dropping her hands to her sides, she leaned forward and leveled a determined state at him. “You took the blame because it was the easy thing to do.”

The easy thing to do?

Easy?

A bark of dry laughter forced its way past his tight throat. But that laughter, hollow and slightly broken to his own ears, ignited a rage within that grabbed ahold of his guts so fast he nearly lashed out its full force upon her. His spine snapped straight and he grabbed her arms. In slow degrees, he pulled her forward, until she rested on nothing but the tips of her toes and her face was just a breath away from his. “You speak utter shite.”

Unyielding, she met his gaze and held firm in his embrace. “Your response suggests that I’ve hit quite the nerve.”

He blinked. She was so certain. So determined. All his life, he’d taken on the role of the unforgivable son. Of the one who’d broken his father’s heart but underneath the surface there had always been the small questioning voice, the voice of a little boy desperately wondering why his father hated him so. That voice had whispered in the cold, lonely nights, before and after the nightmares of his brother’s cold, blue body. *Why?*

“You took the blame to save your father.”

“I didn’t save him,” he choked out. “I broke his heart. My father hated me. He knew what I was and I proved it time and again.”

She stared at him, unflinching. “You filled the role he needed you to.”

“Now, that *is* complete shite.” Something was happening. Something he didn’t understand and he had to stop her talking. Her words were not at all the ones he’d expected to hear and that fear, an emotion he wasn’t familiar with, snaked up through his innards, threatening to strangle him. “And I think I’ve listened to your mad ramblings long enough.”

Sadness filled her eyes and she shook her head. “Too close to the truth, that’s why you’re afraid again.”

He tightened his grip, focusing on the pulsing heat of her body mere inches from his, hating the sympathy he saw in her. He did not want her to feel sorry for him. “I am not afraid.”

“Then why are you driving me away?” she demanded.

“Because I don’t love you,” he snapped. “You are the last woman I could ever want. You are bookish, know nothing of making love, and you dress like a woman would if she could be a man.”

All that bravado, that beautiful confidence she had, crumpled under his words. Her shoulders hunched. “I thought better of you,” she whispered.

“I told you,” he said, his throat tightening, any hopes he’d fantasized over burning to a cinder. “This is who I am.”

“This is who you have to be. Who you’ve chosen to be,” she whispered.

“And why do I *have* to be?” he demanded. “Why don’t you think I *want* this?”

“Oh, I’m sure they’re one and the same.” Her face paled, tinged with sadness.

“But if you didn’t let your brother drown, who did?”

“Cordelia. . . There was no one else there that day. There was no one else—”

“Your father.”

He gaped at her. “That’s—”

“Ridiculous? I don’t think it is. Your brother was your father’s responsibility. Not yours. He hated you so he wouldn’t have to hate himself, Jack. He was a grown man who blamed a little boy because he couldn’t bear it.”

Jack shoved her away from him. Pain cut across his heart so deep he couldn’t draw breath. “Cease.”

“Why? Because that hurt?” she challenged. “I thought you hadn’t any heart.”

“You shouldn’t even know any of this,” he rushed, desperate to stop this conversation before it could go further. “You aren’t one of us.”

Tears shone in her eyes. “No. I am not. I never have been, even though when I was a girl, I desperately wanted to be. I kept waiting, hoping that someone would come to sweep me away from my life. To make everything stop that I couldn’t bear. But you never did.”

“I am no knight in shining armor, Cordelia.”

“No. You are not. And I am no lady fair. So stop insisting you have no heart or that I am a delusional child. We are neither of us these things.”

He did have a heart. A cursed one. One that was breaking with every word she spoke. With every nail of a word that slammed him harder into his coffin of loneliness. She wanted so badly something from him he could never give. If she looked only at his actions, he was a cad. The worst sort of selfish man. He had left her to rot. He hadn't given a damn about her happiness and now that's all he did care for and it was why he had to leave. Drawing in a slow breath, he lifted his palm to her cheek and gently pressed his lips to hers.

The touch of their mouths nearly undid him. If only he were not the man he was, he would wrap his arms around her and never let her go. But he was not the man she envisioned, so he pulled back from the kiss, his heart turning to stone as he did.

She smiled, clearly certain she had convinced him.

As she reached out her beautiful fingers, fingers hardened from work and use, towards him, he strode around her. Without looking back, he opened the door and walked out into the night. Away from the only happiness he had ever known.

CHAPTER 24

Cordelia stared at the door. The painted blue panel still shook on its hinges because Jack had slammed it so hard. This couldn't possibly be happening, could it? All the air vanished out of her lungs and her eyes burned. The colors in the room suddenly burned brighter, the cream of the walls blindingly white in the candle glow and the shade of the blue door vibrated. Even her heart beat with such an explosion of sound she was sure that Jack, now far out into the night, would be able to hear it. Surely, he would turn back, hearing that broken sound?

What had she done?

She'd been honest, that's what she'd done. She'd told him the truth. . . Except. . . Except she'd had the courage to tell him every little thing she'd seen about him and his father but she'd not had the bravery to admit she loved him. *Him*. In all his perfectly broken glory. She loved the man who had been betrayed by his family and his own heart.

A cry, loud and deeply unpleasant, echoed through the room. She clapped a hand over her mouth. Good God, could she have made such a sound? Had it been her? It couldn't have been.

But as her fingers slammed down over her lips, her ribcage began to shake with uncontrollable sobs. Sobs she had kept buried deep within her her entire life. They rolled through her, one after another. Wave after wave of grief falling upon her.

Slowly, she lowered herself to the floor, her knees thunking on the wood floor. Never in her recollection, could she recall a time when a solution had not immediately made itself clear to her. But struggle though she may through the tears making a complete mess of her face, she couldn't think of one.

She'd not even had a week with him. Not one. Just a few days. And now he was gone.

"Madam?"

Cordy turned towards the voice and spotted Harris peeping out from the hallway, his shoulders bent and a slightly embarrassed expression folding his brow into a myriad of wrinkles. She dashed her hand over her eyes and then shockingly her nose.

“You look all of five years old my lady.”

“Do I?” she asked, her voice completely unrecognizable to her own ears.

“You mustn’t let him do this.”

She let out a shuddering sigh which made her feel surprisingly better. “Do what, Harris?”

“Run from love, Your Grace.”

Cordy contemplated the short, little man, wondering if perhaps this wasn’t another delusion the fellow had, rather like his certainty that Boney was still about, ready to take England by storm. “I rather think you’re mistaken.”

“Am I? I’ve known the lad for over a decade. Can you say the same?”

“Hmm. I cannot,” she conceded.

He nodded, satisfied. “You can’t give up on him so easily.”

“Easily?” She groaned, her own heart aching in a way she’d never known.

“That was not easy, Harris. I’ve not cried in my entire life that I can recall.”

The older man tsked. “And isn’t that a tragedy in itself?”

She sniffed, tempted to wipe her nose with her sleeve but she wasn’t that far gone. “I beg your pardon?”

“Well, it seems to me you both need love.”

“I suppose, but Harris,” she swallowed, loath to admit her deepest fear. “I don’t think he loves me at all.”

“But you love him?”

She bit down on the inside of her lower lip, horrified that she was about to admit such a thing at all, let alone to a man she’d known about three days. “Yes. Yes I do.”

“And I bet when things get tough down there in Africa you let your father handle it or mayhap your brothers.”

Her jaw dropped at the outrageous assumption. “The very idea—”

Harris blinked, wide eyed. “You don’t run when things are a bit uncomfortable then, pretty lass like you?”

“I’ll have you know, that I pitch in with the best of them. Why just last winter I—” She stopped herself and a slow grin suddenly defied the remnants of her tears. “I see.”

He nodded. “I knew you were a quick one. Just imagine if we’d given up on the continent in those first years of the war. Looked like we were going to be beaten and beaten good, but old Wellington, he never shirked. He didn’t give up.”

“Are you comparing me to Wellington?” She had a feeling the fellow couldn’t give her a higher compliment.

“You love Jack don’t you?”

She blinked. It was astonishing, but she knew the truth without a doubt. “Yes.”

Harris nodded, clearly pleased with her honesty. “It would take a general to survive his family.”

“But. . .” Her throat tightened. “He doesn’t want me.”

Harris rolled his eyes, crossed the room and offered his cracked and creased, old hand. “Oh aye, he doesn’t want you at all.”

She studied that gentle, offered palm, before taking it. He hoisted her to her feet and then, confident as you please, Harris headed into the drawing room. The clink of glasses drifted towards her, her feet still rooted in her own little puddle of most unbecoming tears.

“Come on then,” Harris called. “You’ll be in need of a drink.”

A spot of brandy did sound most appealing and she truly could use a medicinal restorative. . .Blast. If she would just admit it, she wanted to grab a bottle and do as Kathryn would have suggested; drink the lot.

Sighing, she followed Harris into the small room she’d spent next to no time in.

Harris held out a glass, shockingly full.

She took it and gulped down a swallow of *whiskey*, ready to fortify herself for the forthcoming battle as, no doubt, Harris would proclaim it.

“Flowery lasses who give up and don’t make a fuss, don’t drink whiskey.”

“I beg your pardon?” she asked before she took another healthy gulp.

He arched a shaggy brow. “I can see what’s turning around in your head, like I can see a storm coming in off the sea.”

“Can you indeed?” She gave him a tired smile.

“You’re thinking, how could such a staunch and no nonsense about her girl, be felled by love?”

“Well, yes. That was rather what I was thinking as I made a wet blanket of myself.”

Harris took a drink, handling the snifter with a good deal of ease, drinking the bandy as if he were born to it. “Look here, His Grace needs a special kind of love.”

“I’m listening.”

“He was the younger son of a duke, a duke what couldn’t keep his pants on, and got his jollies from being the most superior man in the room, if you get my meaning.”

“I think I do.”

“Well, Jack never lived it down. Not with his da. And it’s going to take more than a few words to bolster him up and make him see that he needs you.”

She gaped. “Needs me?”

“Aye, needs you,” Harris proclaimed. “I’ve not seen him come alive once in the years I’ve known him, not even on the battlefield. He was just going through the motions. But these last days, he’s been alive. Do you understand that, my lady? You’ve woken him up and he’s trying to go back to sleep because it’s what he knows.”

She took another big drink and nodded, swishing the brandy about her mouth, savoring the delightful burn. “I see. But how do I go about such a thing?”

“Hie yourself to London. Make a splash. Make it impossible for him to not encounter you. Make him see he can’t bear for anyone else to have you. That you belong to him.”

Belong to him.

The very words sent a shiver of anticipation down her spine. She did belong to him. She did and despite her fear that Jack would give her the cut or laugh at her attempts to win him, she was going to try.

Cordy raised her glass to Harris. “Cheers and thank you.”

“Not at all, my lady. You just needed to see it.”

Oh, she saw it now. Those silly tears were gone now, replaced by a clarity bestowed on her by an old soldier. For after all, was she not a woman who pursued what she desired at all cost? Indeed she was. And now it was time for battle. A thought that couldn’t cheer her more. After all, nothing was going to stand in her way. Not when love was so close at hand.

CHAPTER 25

One month later
The Rapier Club
Evening
London

*I*t had never occurred to Jack that his wife would play dirty. She'd seemed so honorable, so sporting, so above it all. He'd been so mistaken.

A gorgon. He'd married a merciless gorgon who wouldn't accept what was best for her. And as a result, Jack Eversleigh, the Duke of Hunt, was cowering. . . Yes, *cowering* in his brother's rapier club because it was the one place she could not track him down.

The blasted woman was a bloodhound. She'd followed him from ball to ball, party to party. She'd attempted to meet him on morning rides and had even had the gall to try to intercept him on the way to his club. The determination was terrifying and he'd only narrowly avoided being engaged in conversation by a hair's breadth.

His family was also in cahoots. His sister, his mother, and, God help them all, his grandmother, were all attempting to get him into the same room as his *wife* and he was having none of it.

It didn't matter that he longed, yes longed, to speak with her. To hold her in his arms and to allow himself to have her.

Jack cradled the bottle of brandy in his arm like a long lost child and desperately attempted to focus on the two men fencing. One, his brother, and two. . . A total unknown, but a fellow that was keeping up with Charles' flying blade with admirable aplomb. Perhaps someone out there in the world was indeed Charles' match for swords.

At that moment, the two men, sweating, but neither out of breath bowed, conceded the match a draw.

Charles strode over, the younger man in toe. The fellow was quite big really. Not quite as big as Charles, but he was a pup. In a few years, the black-haired, grey-eyed man would no doubt be a veritable giant. "Meet your match?" Jack drawled.

“Possibly,” said Charles, as complimentary as he could become. He turned to his opponent. “Have you met my brother?”

“I’ve not even officially met you, sir. Someone simply pointed at you and said you were the best fight in the club.”

Charles smiled dryly. “So I am. . . Until now. I finally have someone to duel with, thank God.”

Jack lifted the crystal decanter. “Care for a drink?”

The young man smiled. “Don’t mind if I do.”

He was awfully familiar, this pup. Jack narrowed his eyes, his brain slightly fuzzy, as he attempted to discern where he might have set eyes upon him.

Charles clapped the young man on the back. “Shall we proceed to one of the common rooms?”

Jack hauled himself up from the floor, staggered slightly and led the way, the two behind him speaking of ripostes and masters that his befogged mind couldn’t discern. Perhaps another drink would fill the hole in his heart? Heart. What nonsense. When had he started thinking so morosely?

Light poured in from the tall windows overlooking St. James Park and Jack plunked himself down in a leather chair, studded manfully with brass tacks. The entire rectangular gathering place was a refuge for all that was manful, point in fact.

Dark wood, green lamps, heavy furniture, and dead animals graced the walls. A woman would turn tail and run. It’s why he’d chosen Charles’ club, he’d known there was no way Cordelia could inveigle herself into his brother’s sanctum.

And he couldn’t see her.

Charles and his friend sat with a good deal more composure but before either could truly settle back, a butler had appeared out of nowhere, as all Charles’ staff did, immediately bringing two more glasses. The older man gave one look to the dwindling amber liquid sloshing around in Jack’s decanter, turned on his heel and marched off, no doubt to rectify the sin of depletion.

Charles cocked his head to the side and studied the younger man. “Now, why have we never met?”

“I’m new to London. Just arrived actually.”

“Indeed,” Charles drawled. “A virgin?”

The young man shifted uncomfortably in his chair. “Hardly.”

“Good then.” Charles clapped the boy on the shoulder. “You’ll come out with us tonight. If you’re as good with your sword as you are with a blade my ladies

will love you.”

Jack caught himself about to say that he was going nowhere. That he was hunkering down until he'd heard confirmed reports that Cordelia had taken off for parts unknown. He couldn't risk seeing her again. He'd crack if he did. But before he could make such a declaration, the pup had leaned forward, excitement bridling his muscled frame.

“Your ladies?” the stranger asked.

Jack eyed his drink. Would it be bad form to continue drinking the dregs of the bottle whilst supplies were being foraged for? “Charles has a string of women at his command. Rather like a harem.”

“Harems aren't all they're cracked up to be,” the young man said, holding out his glass.

Realizing it would be far better if he could get the young stallion sozzled, he poured the remnants of his decanter into the outstretched glass. Drinking alone really was the Devil.

Charles leaned back in his chair, his body casual, but there was an undeniable spark of interest in his gaze. “And you know this first hand.”

A devilish smile confirmed that, indeed, their young visitor did have firsthand knowledge.

“Where in God's name were you in a harem?” Jack asked, an unwelcome feeling conquering the barely tolerable sensation the brandy had invoked.

“Africa.”

Jack stilled. “Africa?”

“Yes. Lived there most of my life if you must know, except for one failed attempt at groom and polish. They took one look at me when I arrived at Eton and sent me back.”

Jack snuck a glance at Charles, who was also sneaking a glance back.

“What?” the young man asked, swinging his attention from one Eversleigh to the next. “It really wasn't anything. The harem business—”

“Never mind the harem.” Jack ignored the growing feeling of dread pooling in his stomach. “What did you say your name was?”

The young chap's gaze widened, sensing something was afoot. “Basingstoke. Anthony Basingstoke. We're guests of the Duke of Darkwell.” He started to point over his shoulder. “My brothers are—”

“Why?” Jack groaned.

“Jack,” Charles said sotto voce. “Keep your damned mouth shut.”

But Jack couldn't. The dam had been opened. Not by the woman herself, but by the gods who clearly enjoyed watching mortals act like idiotic ants without a jot of control as they scurried over this moron infested earth. "She follows me everywhere and now her damned brothers—"

Anthony Basingstoke straightened, his joviality diminishing with the same sort of speed of a gambler who had just lost his last sou. "I beg your pardon, sir?"

"That woman. She is the Devil. A conjurer or just mad."

The color drained out of Anthony Basingstoke's face and he vaulted to his feet. "It's you."

"How original," Jack drawled.

"Bloody Hell," sighed Charles.

"Get up, you bastard," Anthony hissed.

Jack lifted his glass in a mock salute. "I'd rather not, young pup."

"Get up," Anthony gritted.

Jack defiantly lifted his glass and drank.

"You sodding—"

Jack held up his hand, finishing off the brandy before he smacked his lips as rudely as he could. "You were saying?"

Color flushed Anthony's cheeks showing his age. "I said, you are a sodding —"

"Bastard, blah blah blah." Jack dropped his head back to rest against the chair, propped one leg over his knee and grinned. "You clearly haven't been at this very long."

Anthony drew in a righteous breath. "You sir, are a cad."

"And proud of it," Jack replied, lifting up the decanter scowling at its emptiness then bellowing, "Where the hell has the brandy gone?"

"Are you not listening?" Anthony demanded.

"Indeed, I am. But," he let out a burp, pounded his chest, then continued, "because you are related to her, you have managed to miss the essential point."

Young Anthony paused. "Which is?"

"The liquor is gone. Where is it? We might as well have gone to France ourselves."

Charles groaned and covered his eyes with his palm. "Jack, why can't you simply shut your pie hole."

He glared at his twin. "This from you? *Master of Say What I Want When I Want.*"

“Yes,” Charles acceded. “But I do so in such a way as to—”

“Excuse me, but you both seem to be missing the point entirely.”

Jack and Charles glanced at the whippersnapper.

“Which is?” Jack asked, more out of sympathy for the pipsqueak than curiosity.

Anthony’s grey eyes narrowed. “Your arse is about to be handed to you upon a platter.”

Jack looked back to Charles. Simultaneously, they threw back their heads and bellowed with laughter. The boy did, of course, have a right to his indignation, but he was no match for the Eversleigh twins. Jack slouched further down in his chair. “And I thought I’d had a spot too much to drink. Clearly, you’re a bottle up on me, pup.”

“I am not a pup and neither are my brothers.”

Brothers? That gave Jack pause. He knew Cordy had brothers. Now, how many had there been? Surely no more than two?

“What brothers?” Charles asked.

Anthony gave a jerk of his chin towards the back corner of the room at a rather large group of brawny looking men, clearly not from London.

Jack’s laughter subsided and a good dose of sobriety grabbed his guts as he spotted two black-haired pates turn, seemingly as one, his way. Jack smoothed a hand down his front. They were male pictures of Cordelia at different ages. “Those brothers, eh?”

“Yes. So, I think you will be on a platter and very soon.” Anthony smiled a wicked grin. “A nice, rare bit of meat.”

Jack blew out a frustrated breath. He loved a good brawl as much as anyone, but not with his wife’s brothers. “Now look here, this just isn’t done. Is it Charles?”

“A terrible cliché and all that.” Charles added. “Fisticuffs with the in-laws.”

“Get up,” Anthony ordered.

Jack held up his hands, well one hand, since the other still firmly gripped the decanter. “Now, can’t we be civilized, old boy? Cordelia will have a fit if we break heads.”

One of the Basingstoke men, a barrel chested Devil with red streaks in his black hair and a slightly crooked nose, suggesting an intimate acquaintance with boxing, crossed the room in slow, even strides. “Have a fit?” he echoed. “You’ve got it wrong, *old boy*.”

“Have I?” Jack’s vision swam ever so slightly as his sense of bravado did a quick exit. Things were about to get interesting.

“She won’t have a fit,” the boxer gritted. “She’s already bloody had one.”

“Has she indeed?” Jack asked, forcing a lightness to his tone that belied his sudden curiosity. It was all he could do to stop his drunken tongue from asking if she was all right. If she was well. And if she. . . Jack swallowed, hating himself for a fool. Because what he really wanted to know was beyond all her mad, determined pursuit business, was if she truly missed him. As he missed her.

“She has. And now we’re going to beat the lights out of you.”

“I don’t think you will,” Charles said calmly.

“And why not?” the bigger, older brother demanded.

“This is my premises and I will personally see you evicted if you don’t behave in a calm, rational—”

A fist flew. A Basingstoke fist and before Jack knew what was happening, he was up on his feet, knuckles raised. Charles took his back and they squared off against the invaders, ready to go down swinging if necessary. “Five to two. Hardly sporting,” Jack drawled.

The biggest one shrugged. “She’s our sister. We don’t give a rat’s arse about sporting.”

Jack gave a tight nod, ready for a good and welcome beating. Anything to drive that damned woman out of his head. “Understood.”

CHAPTER 26

The club was a mess.

Bottles lay strewn on the Oriental rug, the mahogany tabletops, and there was even one lying upon its empty side atop a lamp.

The Eversleighs and the Basingstokes, on the other hand, were on the floor. All of them. Flat on their arses, each with a bottle in hand. . . Laughing.

"She's quite a handful," James Basingstoke said, the one whose punch had rang like a hammer and whose nose clearly indicated he'd been in a ring before.

Jack lifted a bottle of champagne to his lips.

"Orders us all about," Anthony drawled, a half empty bottle in his hand. "Like we were sheep."

"Not sheep," Edward, the middle brother, with a serious streak which matched the white trace running through his black hair said. He sprawled back onto an elbow. "Goats. She's got us all bleating like goats."

"Goats," intoned James. "Sheep. Bullocks—"

"Castrated bullocks," added Anthony.

"Speak for yourself," countered Edward.

Charles leaned over to Jack and whispered. "A touch of inbreeding in the family, do you suppose?"

"No," Jack sighed. "Just my wife."

"I thought your wife was she who would not be named."

James perked up, propped a leg up and braced his arm on his knee. "Your str—st—"

"Strategy," put in Edward.

"Yes. Sragery," slurred James who had somehow managed to drink two bottles of brandy as if he were a camel and not a man. "Your sragery, Eversleigh —"

"Hunt"

James blinked. "Pardon?"

Jack lifted his brows up and down, mocking his own importance. "I'm the Duke of Hunt, so you don't say Eversleigh you say—."

“Oho,” Anthony laughed, a huge guffaw. “Gents our brother-in-law is a duke.”

“Bunch of ponces,” Edward said.

“Yes, a bunch of ponces those dukes,” said Charles, his lips twitching.

Jack shot him a warning stare. “Whose side are you on?”

“Side?” echoed James? “No sides. Family. We’re all,” a hiccup worthy of a Highland cow emanated from his person. “Family.”

“So we are,” said Charles a little too jovially. “Now what were you saying about my brother’s strategy?”

James looked from Charles to Jack. “Shocking. Is shocking.”

“Yes, very,” said Jack, not really caring what was shocking because he suddenly very much wanted to know what was so faulty about his strategy with his wife. He’d done everything he could to get her to go back to Africa. Perhaps her brothers, drunk as they were, would have some insights.

“Don’t you think it’s shocking?” Another hiccup, which shook the chandelier, slipped out of the drunk James, before he continued, “Donchu think?”

Anthony nodded. “Indeed.” He took a swig of champagne and squinted at Jack and James. “Remarkable.”

Jack pushed himself up. He really didn’t give a bloody fig for what was so shocking or remarkable. Instead, he was beginning to realize there was nothing amiss in his strategy, rather it had to do with the Basingstokes. He’d thought it had just been his wife and then, perhaps, her effect on any man in her vicinity. But now, he was fairly certain that all members of her clan were cracked. “What are you on about?”

Edward pointed at them. “You’re like a walking mirror.”

“That?” Jack strained, his patience growing as thin as the remainder of the drink in his hand. “That is what’s so shocking? We’re twins, for God’s sake. Twins. It does occur.”

“Indubitably,” James said with stunning clarity.

Charles coughed into his drink, a most definite dose of amusement being hidden as he took a swallow.

Jack cocked a brow and gestured with his bottle at the three blackguards sprawled on the floor. “Now, tell me. How do I get rid of her?”

“Rid of me?”

A female voice echoed through the hall. A most definite female voice. A distinct voice. Soft, yet voluptuous. And he knew it all too well. That voice had

been in his every waking thought for the last month. In fact, for a moment, he was sure he'd finally cracked from too much drink. "Did everyone else hear that?"

From the frozen stares of the Basingstokes, it was clear that they most certainly had. Each one of them had the sheepish and slightly petrified expression of boys who'd been caught putting frogs in nanny's bed.

Anthony tried to climb to his feet, but his legs buckled. "Cordy, we were just —"

"Not now, Tony," she said.

Jack's stomach clenched. Oh God. He didn't want to look. He desperately wished to sink in the floor because she was about to see him the way he really was. A man who'd rather avoid reality than be in it. But there was no escaping and the only thing to do was brazen it out and ensure she stayed far, far away.

She strode forward, her verdant skirts kicking out like waves of deep water. The bodice clung to her full breasts, breasts that seemed fuller than last he saw them, and her soft, blonde hair was curled softly atop her head in a fashion he'd never seen. In fact, she almost looked like a stranger. She looked like one of *them*. A *ton* woman.

And he didn't know what to make of it.

Jack forced himself to his feet with a surprising amount of grace given he was three sheets to the wind. And as soon as he was standing, his heart thundered in his ribs, shouting its own mantra as if to say, *she's yours, she's yours, she's yours*. But he would be ruled by his head instead. "You do realize this is a gentleman's club."

"Curious," she drawled. "Since, I don't see any gentlemen."

"Steady on, old girl," James said, slipping on his bum as he tried to scoot into a more respectable sitting position.

"Shut it, James." She lifted that beautifully determined chin of hers. "This is between my husband and me."

"I think you should go," Charles said softly.

She lifted her brows. "Because I am not a gentleman?"

"You do lack the necessary tackle," Jack said, feeling his soul sink through his feet and plummet through the floor.

"I thank the gods," she declared.

"You mean the rocks," he said softly.

She flinched. "What?"

"The rocks," he whispered. "That's what you pray to."

For one brief moment, her stormy gaze softened. "Yes, then. The rocks. I thank the rocks that I am not a man."

It was on the tip of his tongue to reply, *as do I*, but he couldn't. He couldn't open that door. It was barely closed.

She cleared her throat. "In any case, I discovered you were here. I must confess I didn't expect to find my brothers."

"How in the Devil—"

"Does it matter? Suffice it to say, I have my ways."

"She does indeed," Edward said dryly. "She, no doubt, has an entire network here in London now. Give her a week and a—"

"Yes. Thank you, Edward." Cordy folded her hands before her and stared at Jack. "I've come because we are getting nowhere in our behavior."

"No. You are going nowhere. As you should."

"You mean because you don't wish me as your wife?"

He gritted his teeth and gave a bare nod. He daren't speak. He couldn't trust his heart and his tongue was definitely tempted to betray him as well.

"Well, I do hate to disappoint you, but I'm not leaving. After the annulment, I will be taking up residence in London."

"But the dig," Tony said indignantly.

"It's been there over two thousand years, Tony. I do think it can wait and a woman of my charms will be quite adept at raising fund for our enterprises."

"Splendid," James said, clapping his hands. "We can always use more money."

"We can hire more workers," mused Edward.

A sudden flash of horror swept through Jack. Use her charms? Which meant she was going to be *entertaining*. "I forbid it."

She smiled. A very, very dangerous smile. "Do you indeed?"

There was something alarming about the confident note in her tone.

"I do. You're not from London. You don't understand what will befall you if —"

"Oh, Jack. You are a naive soul. Do you think I care for a perfect reputation? All I care about is raising money for our work in Africa and there are many people not quite so concerned with Almacks' that would be most happy to receive me. Reputation be damned. Your mother amongst them."

Charles whistled. "Good God, Jack, she does fight dirty."

Jack's gaze narrowed. "Yes. She does."

"I use what tools I must. I've never been proper. I see no reasons for me to make a pretense of it now."

"You apparently need saving not just from me, but yourself," Jack breathed, marveling at the words coming from his wife. He'd always loved that she wasn't like the others, but the last thing he wanted was her holding court over the debauched asses of London.

"Saving?" James guffawed. "Cordelia?"

"Do shut it," Charles warned.

"No. No. I quite agree," added Tony. "She could lead an army. Anyone who thinks *she* needs saving is an idiot."

"Thank you Tony," Cordy said. "That's very kind."

Tony grinned, a lopsided, drunken sort of reply. "It's true, old girl."

Cordy took a step forward, her gaze glittering with determination. "The annulment will go through fairly soon, my lord. And you shall be free." A cocky glint sparked in her eyes. "And so shall I. Now, I shall take my leave."

And so shall I? What exactly did that mean? "Cordelia, I won't have it. You can't—"

She leveled him with a dagger stare. "You can't have it both ways, Your Grace. Either I'm yours or I'm not. And I'm done waiting for you to make up your mind. So, you haven't a bloody say in whom I see or what I do." She drew in a deep breath. "Good. Now that we've cleared the air, good night."

In a quick and rather dramatic sweep, she turned and made her way through the strewn bottles and cushions, head high, shoulders back, and seemingly with the gods on her side.

Her brothers gaped at her wake. Then looked at each other. Wordlessly, they helped each other up, a process which took surprisingly little time. They followed her out in silence.

There was nothing left to do but blink at the empty doorway. Jack didn't know what he felt, but it wasn't good.

Charles leaned in. "I do think the games have only just begun."

And despite himself, admiration quaked inside him.

His wife, for she still was, was a woman not to be trifled with. However, if she truly thought she could waltz in, throw down such an ultimatum and think he'd take it without retaliation, she was very, very mistaken. "Indeed, they have Charles. Indeed they have."

CHAPTER 27

“*I* don’t think this was a good idea,” Cordelia said frankly, wishing that Kathryn was at this particular ball. But Kathryn was resting. Resting because she was going to be a mother. Cordelia couldn’t have been happier for her friend and she refused to believe that the slight ache in her heart might be a touch of jealousy. No. She was made of much better stuff than that. Besides, if she was to take London by storm, a baby would have to wait. Perhaps for some time. Cordelia shook the sudden heartbreaking thought away.

The Dowager Duchess of Hunt, Cordy’s infamous mother-in-law, snapped her fan shut and pursed her beautiful, rouged lips. Lips most women half her age would traipse over hot coals for. “Nonsense! You’ve spent enough time chasing after my son. You’ve made the right decision. You cannot allow him to behave like a total ass and get away with it. It was your idea to take London by storm and I shan’t let you retreat now.”

Cordelia laughed. She couldn’t help herself. The very best thing she’d done upon returning to London and facing humiliating rejection after rejection on the part of her husband. . . For her chase of said husband had turned into a bloody French farce. . . Had been the acquaintance of her mother-in-law. Hyacinth Eversleigh was a gem of the first water and a breath of fresh air in the stagnate *ton*. She’d even managed to keep the old gorgon of Jack’s grandmama at bay. Something Cordelia was ridiculously thankful for, because given the notes she’d received, the old lady was bound and determined to have her way. It was complimentary in some ways, but she wasn’t going to stay Jack’s duchess if the dratted man didn’t want her. She had far too much self-respect.

“Hyacinth,” Cordelia said in all seriousness, “I don’t know what I would do without you.”

A slow grin pulled at the older woman’s lips. “You, dear girl? Why you would have simply chosen another plan of attack. I do not believe there is a single way in which you wouldn’t be the victor. I still think my son will fall to you and it would be the best thing for him.”

Cordelia sighed. There was no point arguing. After last night’s debacle at the club, she’d put any hope of Jack out of her thoughts. She’d acted the fool long

enough. Eying the packed ballroom, she drew herself up. Desert tribes, marauding across the plain hadn't swayed her, so why in the Devil would a bunch of lords and ladies in starch cravats and winched waists? The English were unlike any other people in the world. It was the only explanation for it.

Speaking of winched waists, hers seemed to be protesting her corset in sharper degrees these last few days. Waving her fan in front of her face, she forced herself to ask with cheer, "Well then, who shall you introduce me to first?"

Hyacinth waggled her brows. "Well, I do believe the Duke of Aston is to be here tonight and he is a delicious fellow. Plump purses for your digs, my dear."

Just as they were about to begin making the rounds of the packed room, Lady Gemma scampered into sight, her full, ivory skirts teasing her ankles.

"Mama," Lady Gemma scrambled to a halt, her face glowing. "I've just been to the terrace—"

"With Lord Markham?" The dowager duchess clasped her fan with delight. Not the usual response of a mama to a daughter who'd just been out to the terrace and presumably not alone.

Gemma made a face. "Lord no." She glanced askance at Cordelia, her cheeks blushing. "A gentleman unknown to you, Mama."

From the guilty look upon Gemma's face when looking at her, Cordy had the distinct feeling that somehow she was involved in the terrace business. . . But she wasn't so. . .

Cordy snapped her gaze back to the ballroom. James, towering above most of the men of the ton, his black hair gleaming under the candlelight, was making his way hastily towards the exit, a perplexed look of stunned mystification upon his face. A look quite uncommon to her skeptical, capable, and irascible brother.

"Gemma," Cordelia began. James would not be a wise choice. Not even for a dalliance. He was completely absorbed by pots. Two thousand year old pots, she granted, but pots nonetheless and if he was kissing Gemma, she had little doubt that he'd been cornered. And cornering James was a very, very inadvisable proposition. "I must warn you—"

Gemma sniffed, tossing a longish curl behind her ear. "Really, Cordelia, variety is the spice of life, is it not Mama?"

The dowager duchess smiled graciously, as if they were talking about the next shoot in Norfolk. "Indeed it is my darling, but I do not think Cordelia shares our desire to taste all the lips we may."

Cordy swayed slightly. She'd had one pair of lips and that was quite enough, thank you very much. Look at the trouble such an endeavor had caused in her perfectly ordered life. "Taste? All the lips—"

Hyacinth snapped open her fan and waved it luxuriously before her face. "My dear, men would have us be flowers, immobile, whilst the bee moves from bloom to bloom. I'm sure you've already seen the folly of that. Even if it was with my dear son."

"Most unfair," Gemma contributed. "How shall we know which bee we prefer if we do not pluck up our roots and experiment?"

"Experimentation is essential," Hyacinth exclaimed like an impassioned curator, "in life if we are to learn or grow."

Cordy drew in a quick breath. Life with the Eversleighs was enough to send her head pounding. "From a logical point of view, I must agree. When excavating, we must experiment with new methods and—"

"Oh good!" Gemma gushed. "I should hate to think you disapprove of me. . ." Before she could continue, Gemma's eyes flared before she swore *sotto voce*, "Hells bells."

"Gemma," her mother intoned, "whilst I too use invectives, there is a time and—"

Lady Gemma leaned forward and hissed, most unbecomingly "Lady Swinborne is upon us. . . in full sail."

"Bloody tart," Hyacinth huffed, glancing about, no doubt looking for said *bloody tart*.

Cordy found the insult most amusing given that many might describe Her Grace in such a fashion. But in any case, she turned her gaze to see what dragon might be heading their way. She fully expected a crone, warts upon her nose, and a stare which would wither them to stone.

For an inexplicable reason, she tensed. She didn't know why but if she'd been a cat, her back would be arched and her tail would be in full puff.

The woman didn't have the look of a shrew. Quite the opposite. A diminutive porcelain doll came to mind. Cordy leaned towards her mother-in-law and whispered out of the corner of her mouth. "Who is that?"

But before anyone could reply, the woman was before them, her violet eyes flashing with vicious amusement.

"Dowager Duchess," the porcelain doll oozed.

Truly. Oozing. She did indeed ooze. Sensuality, point of fact. Cordelia perked up, her curiosity competing with her instant dislike. Why would such a

woman head into territory that was clearly unwelcoming?

“Lady Swinborne, have you been taking the waters?” Hyacinth tilted her head to the side, a speculative gesture which let her gaze linger on the other woman’s rouged cheeks. “You look rather boiled.”

Lady Swinborne drew up for a moment, her perfect little nose pinching as she inhaled sharply, but then a rich, seductive laugh tumbled out of her mouth. Her blonde curls, laced with emeralds and peacock feathers bounced. . . As did her considerable bosom, improved by a tight bodice of iridescent sapphire silk. “How droll, you are Duchess,” she sighed. “I do believe I am overheated by the excitement.”

If one could hate a woman for her looks alone, Cordelia would have done so. But she was above such things surely. It mattered not that she suddenly felt like a sunburnt bit of bacon next to a puffed up prancing bird.

“Ladies such as yourself are always in heat, so it would seem,” Hyacinth returned with a smile.

Cordy swung her gaze from one woman to the other then looked at Gemma. Were blades about to be drawn? Would blood spill upon the polished parquet floor? Given that she’d not brought her parasol for battle, she stepped forward, jabbing her hand out to shake the odious woman’s hand. “How do you do? We’ve not been introduced.”

Lady Swinborne gazed at her hand as if it were something dead the dog had rolled in and then brought in the house.

“Lady Swinborne,” Hyacinth said tightly, “Lady Cordelia Eversleigh.”

Lady Swinborne gave a low laugh. “Not for long, I hear.”

“No, not for long,” Cordy stated, refusing to be pulled into the mire. “The little time I’ve had has been positively trying.”

“Was it?” Lady Swinborne asked with a supercilious arch of her blonde brow. “The time I had was delicious.”

Aha. Now, she knew why she’d instinctively disliked the woman. She was one of the many who had cavorted with her husband. “Did you? Well, you must have ruined him then for all other women.”

The three other ladies stared at her as if she had just produced a plucked chicken for their gratification.

“The Duke of Hunt?” Lady Swinborne gasped. “Ruined by me?”

Cordelia studied the other lady for a moment then decided to launch into her new tactic. Surely, compliments would divert her from her present vitriol.

“Clearly a woman of your beauty and talent would be capable of such a thing, no?”

Lady Swinborne’s forehead puckered, clearly looking for the trap.

But there wasn’t one. Jack had been ruined for any woman that might love him. And so she said with utter honesty, “I don’t think he shall ever be capable of giving his heart to a woman. Do you?”

Lady Swinborne frowned. “Come to think of it, he never gave me his heart.”

Lady Gemma and Hyacinth gaped.

Somehow, Lady Swinborne and Cordy had done the undone thing. They were openly discussing Lady Swinborne’s love affair with Jack.

“Well, you must know, he’s never *actually* been my husband. Otherwise how could I ask for an annulment? You are much more to his preference, I think.”

“Clearly not or. . .” Lady Swinborne bit her lower lip.

“He wouldn’t have thrown you over,” drawled Gemma.

“Now, Gemma that is not fair,” Cordy protested, suddenly wishing to learn more about Jack, even if it was from a former mistress. “Jack is a most curious man. Perhaps we should discuss his propensities with his other women. If we did such a thing, we might discover who it was that did indeed ruin him for all others.”

“Cordelia,” Gemma ventured, “I think—”

“I think it’s a splendid idea,” Lady Swinborne burst out. “I never knew what to make of it. I did all the things he liked. My friend, Lady Eden did the same thing. And he. . . Well. . .”

“He acted an ass, did he not?” Cordy asked, wondering what the deuce was driving her. But she had the utter clarity of knowing whatever it was, it was the right thing. For some reason, she felt if she could just make sense of Jack’s past, she’d be able to dismiss him from her thoughts. And never let her heart hurt over him again. Yes. The more evidence she could gather, the more she’d understand him. And the more she understood him, the less she would be curious.

“He did,” Lady Swinborne confessed. “Yes.”

“Would you be so kind as to introduce me to Lady Eden?” Cordy inquired. “Is she here?”

“Cordy,” Gemma said through clamped teeth. “What are you doing?”

Hyacinth arched a brow. “She’s being deuced clever. That’s what’s she doing.” She waved her fan in the direction of the ball. “Go. Meet them all, if you have the courage. I cannot wait to see the outcome.”

Lady Swinborne blinked. “I—I don’t know—”

“Come. We are of the same genus and gender, Lady Swinborne.” Cordy crooked her elbow, tempting the other woman to take her arm. “We must stick together.”

CHAPTER 28

Jack never would have thought death might be preferable to his present position, but he was beginning to come around to the supposition. After all, it had been his intention to stride into the ball and dance with every single one of the women he'd shared a bed, barn, or carpet with to show his wife what an utter ass he was and what a lucky escape she had made.

It seemed, however, that intentions where it came to his wife were completely impossible to maintain. Intentions as it turned out, would have to be tossed out the proverbial window because every woman that he had thought to ask to dance was sitting around his wife. And she was ruling court.

"Doth mine eyes deceive me?" chortled Charles.

"It depends," Jack gritted. "Do you see my wife?"

Charles clapped him on the back. "Look at her. Just. . . Just look."

Jack couldn't decide if he should grin or scowl. "I am looking."

"Are you certain you don't wish her? Her dauntless spirit is a wonder of our age. I could marry her. She likes the look of you. Therefore she likes the look of me," Charles said, a Devil's gleam in his eye. "We'd rub along quite well together, I think."

The very idea of anyone *rubbing* along with his wife sent a red streak through Jack's vision. "Do you wish to keep your tongue?"

"The ladies would be dismayed if it were removed."

"Then keep it behind your teeth." With that, Jack did the only thing a man in his position could do aside from running for the hills or the bottle. He strode forward, wading through his former paramours and held out his hand to his wife. "Do me the honor of this dance."

She gazed up at him, her blue eyes alight with mischief and something else. Something far more powerful than a moment's laughter at his expense. "I will."

He nodded, stunned but pleased that this would be simple. Once he had extracted her—

"If you answer but one question."

His hand tensed, still hanging mid-air. His silence was punctured by the strains of a Vienna waltz drifting in on its sugary notes.

“Surely, you are not afraid of a simple question?” she asked, batting her lashes.

“Ask whatever it is you wish,” he replied, hand still outstretched, sensing he’d somehow slipped into a trap. “And I will answer. . . if I choose.”

The ladies tittered with laughter as if they had known his reply.

It was damned tempting to shift on his feet like a schoolboy brought before the headmaster but he’d be damned before he let the women know he was feeling like a man standing opposite a firing squad.

“Why is it that you have only engaged with married women?” she asked softly.

Suddenly, under the intensity of her gaze and the soft, sympathy of her voice which seemed to know him all too well, he couldn’t breathe.

He was surrounded by skirts. Wide, colorful skirts of married women and several sets of probing stares. But the only one that mattered was his wife’s. “I hardly think that appropriate for our present company.”

“What other company would it be appropriate for?” she queried lightly, but there was the slightest edge to her tone.

“Perhaps,” he said, sincerity deepening his voice, “just you and me.”

“No.” She shook her head with mock woe. “No. You’ve made it clear I am just as they, bored with me as you are.”

Bored. He’d said that. He’d been an idiot and he felt paralyzed, unable to make any sort of decision which would rescue him from this moment. There was only one thing to do. Something he seemed only willing to do when she bid him. Speak the truth.

Jack drew in a long breath. “It is my fate,” he said simply.

Cordelia’s eyes softened for the briefest moment but then she shook her head, her blonde curls teasing her cheek. “According to your past words, you find ladies boring, scheming, disloyal. If you find us so, why do you engage with us at all?”

Jack stared at his wife. Surely she recalled. She’d said he was shallow and pleasure seeking. “Because I prefer pleasure to obligation.”

“That is the reason then that you cast us all off?” she checked, her chin lowering. “Because of pleasure not obligation?”

He gave a tight nod. It was true. Pleasure was the only thing he was good for. Dancing. Carousing. Drinking.

“I don’t believe you,” she said. “I think what you do is very much out of obligation.”

Her words hit hard. And brought to mind why he had walked away from her into the night weeks ago. She was determined to make him into something he was not. A good man. “Cordelia. Stop.”

She waved a hand around her, gesturing to the women about her. “Stop what? We are merely bandying theories.”

Jack leaned forward, took her gloved hand in his and hoisted her to her feet. “Come with me.”

She tugged against his hand. “I would rather—”

He tugged right back. He had to get her into his arms. Away from these women who had, no doubt, only confirmed that he had never shared any part of his person but his body with them. “And I’d rather you danced with me.”

She laughed humorlessly. “I’m not at all surprised you wish to avoid this conversation, but you’ve rescinded the right to make requests of me.”

An impulsive urge spiked through him and he arched a brow. “You’re still my wife.”

“Am I?” she whispered.

Leaning towards her, he suddenly wished he could sweep her from the room and show her just how much she was still his wife. “Until the courts deem otherwise.”

She squared her shoulders, undaunted by the heat of his tone. “Then ask nicely.”

He snorted. But then again, if that’s all she wished, then he would be more than happy to appease her and get her into his arms as quickly as he could. Bowing low over her gloved hand, he said, “Your Grace, will you do me the honor of accompanying me on the dance floor?”

She sank into a deep curtsy, matching his bow. “I would be delighted.”

The rest of the world seemed to fade away as he led her back out to the ballroom. With a degree of possessiveness he hadn’t intended, he placed a hand on her waist and took her free hand in his.

All eyes turned towards them and a wave of gossip, whispered amidst the strains of the orchestra, seemed to surround them. Much to his irritation, but not surprise, their bodies moved in perfect alignment as he began to guide them about the floor. It was as if they had danced a thousand dances together. Perfect dances in which each partner knew the other’s every strength and weakness. Every curve and line.

It was torturous heaven.

The layers of silk and corset between his hand and her body were a damned nuisance. The soft scent of clean soap and a hint of lavender surrounded him and he was falling fast. Falling fast into his deep desire for his own wife. It was all he could do not to whisk her into a dark hall and ravish her. He'd certainly spent enough nights alone in his bed recently, dreaming of such a thing. Something which had not occurred to him since he'd been little more than a boy.

It was all too ironic. Temptation was something to which he usually gave in to without thought. Now, he had to resist it with every muscle of his being. No. Not just resist it. He had to drive it away. London wasn't the place for his beautiful Cordelia. "You truly intend to stay?"

She kept her gaze averted, slightly over his shoulder. "As you see."

Purposefully, he bent his head, gazing at her perfect face. "Have you missed me?" he asked.

A sad smile tilted her lips. "Galling as it is to admit," she said softly. "I have."

It was so hard to believe, that a woman as marvelous as she could miss his company. So hard to believe, he missed a step and nearly stomped on her toe.

She let out a concerned yelp. "Ah. I can see you shall now say, *and I have missed you like the plague.*"

A laugh boomed from him. God. It was cruel that she could inspire humor in him even in such a moment. "I have missed you, I cannot deny it."

"Yet you act the ass."

Another laugh rumbled out of him. "How succinct of you."

She shrugged as they whirled away from the orchestra. "Accuracy and bluntness are my specialties."

"As is befriending the members of my tarnished past," he said dryly.

She gave him an innocent stare. "If I am to know you truly, how am I to ignore your tarnish?"

"And, now that you know more?" he queried. He tried to sound as if her reply meant nothing, but he couldn't ignore the anxiety gnawing at his innards.

She tilted her head back, gazing at him through her long lashes. "I find that your *joie de vivre* hides a great deal of sadness."

"Sadness," he echoed.

"Mmm." She pursed her soft, red lips in thought. "It is remarkable seeing how you did it again and again."

Her pity struck an unpleasant note in him. He didn't want that. He hadn't weeks ago and he sure as hell didn't wish it now. "Did what precisely?"

“You ensured no woman could ever get close enough to love you,” she said simply. “For instance, if I had to guess, I am the only woman who knows how you take your tea, except perhaps your mother.”

He wanted to snap that she was ridiculous. That such a thing didn’t matter. Instead, he found himself asking. “How do I take it?”

“Plain with lemon. I am also fairly certain you don’t care for quail eggs.”

He furrowed his brow, astounded by the workings of her mind. While he knew he should be focusing on getting rid of her, he couldn’t. He longed to hear every word she had to say. “What would make you assume such a thing?”

“I ate them voraciously that day we dined alfresco.” She peered up at him, an incredulous look wrinkling her pert nose. “You didn’t touch them.”

Is that what she had thought then? Clearly, she hadn’t considered something else entirely. “I was otherwise distracted,” he said lowly, whispering it against her ear.

“Oh?” she gasped.

“With your fascination for a large pile of dirt,” he murmured, resisting the urge to cause a scandal and nibble.

She didn’t jerk away, but rather held her head against his cheek. “It was a barrow,” she whispered.

The sudden intimacy between them was painful. Terribly painful. He swallowed. If he dared, he could pull her to his chest, into his arms, and make her his. If he just dared. “Why are you still here?” he demanded, his voice harsh now.

“Because, Your Grace,” she pulled back and stared full into his face, blue gaze unyielding, “you love me.”

“I do?” he rasped, feeling as if he couldn’t draw breath. The ball was suddenly too hot. There were too many people. Too many voices. And then there was Cordelia, declaring he loved her.

“Yes,” she said simply, a sure smile curving her lips.

“Cordelia. . . my darling girl,” his voice was failing him. He couldn’t believe it. In his whole life, no other woman save she had laid him low with emotion. “I will not bring you down.”

“That seems to suggest that you do love me,” she pointed out gently. “But you wish to save me from yourself. A most asinine thing to do.”

He forced himself to lean away, to harden himself. “I don’t love you, Cordelia.”

“Kiss me,” she murmured, apparently undeterred.

“Here?” he said blankly. It seemed that not only had his usually controlled emotions abandoned him so had his mind. Where the hell had his brain gone?

“Not here.” A delicious laugh rippled from her lips. “In a dark nook.”

“A dark nook?” Was he only capable in answering her with stunned questions? It certainly seemed so.

She nodded. “I do think that is the appropriate place. Still, you must forgive me if I haven’t your family experience with amours.”

“Thank God for that,” he drawled.

“Prove to me you don’t love me,” she said. “If you prove it to me, I shall leave London. I shall leave your life forever. Kiss me.”

Those words lingered between them, heating his blood to a fever pitch. What she was asking was a fool’s request. He’d kissed hundreds of women. He could kiss her without feeling. He could.

Still, it was a trap. He knew it to be. His body hungered for hers in such a way he could barely stand so close to her and not sweep her into his arms. But what she could not understand was that even if he was swept away with passion, there had never been a kiss powerful enough to make him stay.

So, he would do this. He would give in to her request so that she would finally see the truth. The truth of him, an empty shell of a man who could only give pleasure of the flesh, but not of the soul.

Wordlessly, he swept them out into a hall. Vacant except for towering Dutch paintings and the low glow of distant candles, it was the perfect escape for lovers. Jack slowly backed her into a wall, caressed his fingers along her chin then tilted her head back for his kiss.

Just the contemplation, the promise of the touch of her lips, sent his heart thundering with fear and desire. The fear that whispered in his heart insisted that he could never let her go and yet he must. He must.

But not before. . . Not before he kissed her one last time.

CHAPTER 29

*I*t was a dangerous game she was playing. She'd made up her mind to leave him be. To accept he couldn't be touched. And yet, he'd shown up at the ball. She'd thought for certain that after their encounter at the club, he'd continue to avoid her. She hadn't dared hope. Yet, here he was. In a hall with her. About to kiss her.

Tilting her head back, she offered her mouth up.

The kiss was deliciously punishing, a demand. His lips took hers, devouring her with untamed hunger. Within moments, he pulled her tight to his body, his arms bending her back to further deepen his kiss. She clasped his shoulders, holding on for dear life. Holding on for the love she knew was between them. Even if he did not.

His tongue caressed the line of her lips. On a soft moan, she opened to him, allowing his tongue to thrust deep into her mouth as she so wished his cock to do. If she could have, she would have wrapped her legs around his waist and urged him to let her ride him here and now.

As it was, despite her skirts, she curled her calf around his, sliding her thigh along his.

A rough growl emanated from his throat and he slid his hands into her hair, tugging slightly. Their tongues tangled around their rough breaths and need.

Even through his breeches and the folds of material swathed about her limbs, she felt the evidence of his desire harden. Out of sheer need, she slipped her hand between them and caressed him.

He bucked against her hand. And he tilted her head back, with a passionate tug. His mouth moved from hers to the line of her throat, kissing the delicate skin, until he made his way to her breasts. There he bit lightly at the pressed mounds. Then he took his hands from her hair, sliding them along her ribs before he pressed his palms to her breasts, plumping them for his siege.

His thumbs found her nipples, tracing them, teasing them into hard points. Impatiently, he pulled aside her gown and sucked one nipple into his hot mouth, first barely touching it with his tongue then taking it between his teeth and nipping almost to the point of pain.

She gasped, digging her fingertips into his shoulders. This was what she had hoped for. The moment when they both abandoned themselves to each other. The moment when everything she had worked for succeeded. She drew in a shuddering breath of pleasure and sighed, "I love you."

Instantly, he stopped, his entire body freezing. Slowly, in terrible degrees, he pulled away. First his mouth, then his body, and then at last, his hands slid away from her, adjusting her bodice.

His face was stricken but those dark eyes of his were dead of emotion. "I have kissed you then. And now I must take my leave."

"W-what?"

"Go back to Africa, Cordelia. Do not try to rescue me. It is a fool's errand. And I have never taken you for a fool." Without looking back, he turned and strode down the hall and back out into the ball.

Away from her.

Again.

She'd given her heart freely again and he'd stomped upon it.

Again.

Why had she listened to Harris? Why? And why, when he'd asked her to dance hadn't she told him to go the bloody Devil?

Cordelia's fingers curled into fists, a cry of fury and pain shook in her heart but she refused to give it voice. She refused to be the fool any longer. Her heart had been his for the taking. All her life it had been his. But he didn't want it. He'd never wanted it.

She would never be more than his wife in name only and even that was about to slip away. He'd had what he wanted. And now he was done. He'd never been hers. Not once.

She stumbled down the hall, her vision hazy. She refused to admit that it might be tears marring her sight. At first, the sudden tightening of her insides did not alarm her, but the hall swam slightly and her stomach lurched upward.

Clamping a hand over her mouth, she darted into an empty room. She gazed about frantically, horrified she might cast up her accounts on the floor. She spotted a Grecian urn. Despite the fact she felt she could barely hold on, she checked the vase to see if it was genuine. She was not about to be sick on an artifact. She'd rather do so on the floor.

The paint was perfect and it was clear that it had not been baked by a thousand some odd years of sun, so without further ado, she cast up her accounts, clutching the ceramic pathetically.

She didn't hear the footsteps but the hand on her back was unmistakable. Someone had discovered her. She froze, appalled she'd been found thusly.

"You slept with him, did you not?"

That aged decisive voice. A voice of a harridan shook her to her core, for there was no disdain or judgment in it as there had once been.

A perfectly pressed, snow white, linen handkerchief appeared before her face, dangling from a set of wrinkled, slightly bony fingers. Sniffing, she took the object and quickly dabbed her mouth. Was it possible to make a bid for the window, disappear into the night and never, ever have to see a member of the infamous Eversleigh family again?

She eyed the distance. It was highly unlikely. So instead, she resolved herself to an uncomfortable interview and said, "Thank you."

"Of course," the ancient dowager replied, her voice shockingly kind. "You're family, my dear."

She tensed, narrowed her eyes, and turned to face the old bat. The older woman gazed on her with tired, yet understanding eyes. The last time she had seen the old woman, the dowager had been a termagant. A crone who had been determined to have her way. Cordelia narrowed her eyes, deeply suspicious. "I do beg your pardon, but has someone taken over your person?"

The corners of the dowager's mouth lifted in what could only be deemed a smile. "I am in complete control of my person."

"Unlike myself," Cordelia muttered. Her eyes widened as she realized what a fright she must look. She lifted a trembling hand, touching her terribly askew curls. "Do I look terribly bad?"

The dowager's gaze softened with sympathy, but she assessed her face, in a quick manner. "You look like a woman with child, who's just been abandoned by the father. . . So, yes. But it's quite understandable."

Cordelia blinked. The words rang in her ears but she couldn't quite fathom them. "I—I—"

The dowager's mouth opened in surprise, a decidedly shocked gesture for her usually authoritative person. "You were unaware?"

Opening her mouth then closing it quickly, Cordy snapped, "I'm not—"

The older woman cocked her head to the side, unswayed by the quick refusal. "Do forgive me, but I'm fairly certain you are."

Determined to be skeptical, and to avoid a potentially alarming truth, Cordy pursed her lips. She couldn't be pregnant. And besides, someone else wouldn't know first, would they? "How would you know?"

The dowager arched a wiry, silver brow in simple assertion.

“How?” Cordy gritted, feeling exactly how a mummy must feel under inspection.

The dowager sighed and tightened her grip on her ivory headed cane. “I would think you’d understand the simple mechanics of how such a thing came about—”

“No. No.” Cordelia lifted a hand and pressed it to her suddenly throbbing eye. “How do you surmise that I am with child?”

“If you must know, I have had servants investigate your ch—”

Groaning, Cordelia whipped up a hand lest she go into more detail. “Don’t. Don’t say it.”

“You did ask,” she said, unapologetically. “It is in my nature to know everything about those close to my family which does, indeed, now include you.”

“I did ask, but I had no idea that you would be so. . .” She searched for a word that would describe such a compulsive busy body. “So. . .”

“Thorough?” she supplied.

“Yes.”

“My dear, as you will learn, if you haven’t already, the Eversleighs are no easy lot.” She thumped her cane against the Persian rug. “But I had an idea from a few other points.”

“Did you?”

“You’ve evaded me since your return to London,” her gaze dropped to her bosom in a calculating sort of way. “But tonight, I couldn’t help but notice a certain part of your anatomy seems a trifle larger, your moods, usually very stable, are completely out of sorts, and then there is the fact that you just cast up your accounts in a Grecian urn. Also, your good friend, Kathryn, the Duchess of Darkwell, told me.”

“My moods are not out of sorts!” she retorted a trifle more loudly than she had intended. She smoothed her hands down the front of her gown. “Your grandson has simply made my life more trying than usual lately.”

“Hmph,” the dowager replied.

Ignoring the old lady’s noise, Cordy felt her heart slam painfully against her ribs. “Why would Kathryn tell you but not me?”

“Kathryn is a good woman who knows I will help you. That I actually do care about you and my grandson. Even if my methods are dubious.” The

dowager sighed. “She was also afraid you’d run halfway to Egypt if she confronted you a week ago.”

Abruptly, the several mornings and evenings her stomach had run riot and her extremely sensitive sense of smell, things she had attributed to an unusual case of disappointment, no longer seemed so innocent. Any sane woman would have felt a sinking sensation, for the father was most adamant about his position or lack thereof. But it was not sadness Cordelia felt. It was the strangest little flicker of hope. She’d never once considered she might be a mother. A confused mother, but a mother nonetheless. “What am I to do?” she whispered.

The dowager’s eyes flared slightly. “You’re asking my opinion?”

She couldn’t fight the laugh that bubbled from her throat. “Shocking, is it not?”

This time the older lady smiled, a warm, slow movement of her lips. “Very shocking. But I’m glad. And I will happily give it.”

Cordy’s laughter dimmed. She needed Jack’s grandmother to understand how difficult it was for her to even contemplate needing assistance. “I don’t generally ask for help.”

“I know.” The dowager gave a nod. “It’s something I’ve come to admire about you. Your capability. At first, I thought it unnatural and then I realized you are exactly what Jack needs.”

Cordelia’s face crumpled. Horrified, she realized tears were filling her ears. What on earth was wrong with her?

“Oh, dear girl, it was not my intent to induce—”

She sucked in a shuddering breath and said around a rather annoying sob, “He’s told me to go back to Africa. More than once.”

Shoulders tensing and eyes wide with alarm, the Dowager Duchess of Hunt reached out a hand and rapped her sympathetically on the back. “Of course he has. What else would he do?”

She jumped forward at the old lady’s shockingly heavy-handed attempts at condolence and managed to sputter, “Ask me to stay, of course.”

“Jack?” his grandmother huffed. “Never.”

The dowager was about to administer another round of sympathy, a gesture she clearly assumed to be soothing, but Cordelia stepped to the side and blew her nose on the handkerchief. The dowager stopped mid-swing at the noise which emanated from Cordy’s person.

Sighing, Cordelia balled the fabric in her palm. “You sound like Harris.”

“Who the deuce is Harris?”

“Someone who tried to convince me that Jack loves me and. . . Oh never mind.”

“I won’t never mind, because, dear girl, he does. Everyone in the family already knows it but him. I even think he knows it, but he’s got it in his head he’s not allowed to be in love. That we all think him unworthy of it.”

Cordelia studied her hands, wishing she’d never been put in such a precarious position. But she had no one to blame but herself. After all, it had been her decision to go off with Jack. No one had forced her. She could have put a firm foot down and she was certain that her husband would have let her go. He wasn’t a monster. “He is most determined that he does not love me.”

“Yes.” The dowager let out a beleaguered breath, before banging her cane against the floor again, clearly ready to convey her apparently superior plan. “So, there’s really only one thing left to do, my dear. If you have the courage. Do you have it? The courage, I mean?”

Cordelia scowled.

“Of course you do,” the dowager said, a strange smile of anticipation gracing her features. “Silly of me to ask.”

Cordelia folded her arms under her breasts, wondering why so many people kept asserting she had to have courage to win her husband. The way she was feeling her husband was going to need a good deal of courage when next she was able to lay her hands upon him. “You’ve noticed I am not a wilting flower, then?”

The dowager leveled her with a serious stare. “Everyone has noticed.”

Cordelia’s arms dropped down to her sides and she stared up at the ceiling, wishing once again that she could disappear through the floor. All of London had seen her act the besotted fool. *She*. She who had never known a foolish day in her life. “Oh God,” she groaned.

“Be not dismayed by your behavior,” the dowager soothed, “because you’re going to have him.”

Cordelia dropped her gaze from the ornate cherubs frolicking along the frescoed ceiling. “How?”

“You’re going to trap him.”

CHAPTER 30

Jack had an intensely bad feeling about all this. The papers should have come by yesterday and yet there was no sign of imminent arrival. And it wasn't dread which was stirring his stomach. It was hope. Ridiculous, crack-brained, perverse hope. What if? What if she'd contested the annulment?

No. No, he couldn't possibly allow himself to fantasize over such a thing. He'd been damnably cruel to Cordelia. Unforgivably cruel. Which of course had been his intention. He frowned. But he could at least be honest with himself. He'd wanted her to stay.

Jack pulled at his slightly too tight cravat and stared at the decanter of brandy wondering if it was too early to indulge. He knew what his mother would say. She'd say that it was never too early if there was good cause. And he was fairly certain that sitting about waiting for legal papers, which would finally put his marriage on the chopping block, qualified. But that wasn't the only reason he was tempted to drain the brandy bottle dry.

The bloody fact was he *missed* his wife.

He missed her. And it no longer mattered that he didn't deserve her. He'd never done the noble thing. Not in his entire life and why the hell should he start now? Because Aston had told him to? Because he'd wanted to try to be good? So far, being good was the most brutal thing he'd ever done.

Damn it, he was in love with Cordelia and she him. So why wasn't he storming out of the house to claim her?

He knew why. In a crypt, not far out of the city, were two reasons. His father and his older brother. Even now, their voices haunted him. One, choking on water, and the other sharp, full of bitterness and recrimination. He was not free of them. And until he was, just as Cordelia had insisted, he would never be free to have her. But how? How did he let go twenty some years of self-condemnation?

A pounding on the door stirred his thoughts away from the decanter and the possibility of tracking down Cordelia, even as far as the fabled origins of the river Nile.

His gut tightened, as it had done every time the damned door had been bothered. Was it finally going to be the dreaded announcement that he was a bachelor once again? The bachelor he'd insisted on being for the entirety of his adult life, and even when happiness had stared him full in the face?

The butler, Horton, shuffled along the hall into the foyer and then, instead of the polite murmuring that usually followed such an occurrence, there was a loud banging as the door slammed open and a chorus of loud men's voices thundered through the house.

Horton's old voice raised to the pitch of a shocked, little girl and there were the sounds of shoes scuffling along marble.

Jack strode to his door, tore it open and suddenly wished he hadn't decided to come to the rescue of his ancient butler. All of the Basingstoke men stood in the foyer, all in various positions trying to get around Horton, apparently without hurting him.

"There he is," James shouted.

Anthony's sharp grey eyes swung to him. "You bastard."

Jack sighed. "I suppose yes." Jack rubbed a hand along his forehead. "Allow them entrance, Horton."

Horton straightened, smoothing his cravat and his terribly askew coif.

"Where is she?" Anthony demanded, whirling about the room as if *she* might suddenly appear.

Jack's insides tightened with sudden suspicion. "What do you mean?"

"Cordelia," Anthony stated tightly. "She's gone. And no one knows where."

"What the hell do you mean?" Jack demanded, a shocking dose of panic sending his heart slamming against his ribs.

"She's run off," Anthony rushed. "We thought at first, to Paris, but there's no record of her sailing and James found a note."

Jack sighed, forcing himself to remember that Cordelia wouldn't want his help. Not if she'd left the country. "She's very capable of taking care of herself —"

"She's with child," James boomed.

The room froze and all Jack could hear were the words *with child*. Everything, even his heart, seemed to stop for one mind numbing moment. "Could you repeat that?" he whispered.

"She's with child and she's run off," Anthony said, his young face hard.

Jack drew in a ragged breath then staggered, unsure if he should sit or stand or pass out. "I—I didn't know."

“Of course you didn’t,” James snarled. “Your grandmother tried to convince her to trap you but our sister is made of sterner stuff than that.”

“Of course she did,” Jack sighed. And that might have been the most foolish thing his grandmother could have done. Cordelia would never stoop to something so nefarious. Unlike the Eversleighs, she didn’t have an underhanded bone in her body. He paused. He was going to be a father. A *father*. And the woman he loved more than anything was carrying that baby. Perhaps it wasn’t such a terrible day after all. “The annulment papers are still in the courts?”

Anthony nodded. “No matter what we said, she refused to call them out.”

Elation, that was all he could think to call it, swept through him and left all the anger and bitterness of his past naught but a cinder within him. It had to be the heavens conspiring for him. Because this was the one piece of news which could utterly convince him that Cordelia and he could not end their marriage. They were destined and not a single thing, not his father, his past, his own feelings about his self-worth would get in the way now. Because doing the right thing now meant being married to the woman he loved.

“Find Charles,” he ordered, striding to the door. “He’ll be at The Rapier Club. Make him aware of the situation and see if he can stop the papers. Tell him to cite anything. Everything. That we were married in secret.”

“Were you?” Anthony squeaked.

“No,” he replied, his spirits a whirl with joy. “But I’d declare to the world we’d been married by a priest and made love six ways from Sunday to keep her.”

“Steady on,” Anthony said, a look of horror creasing his tanned face.

“Steady on?” Jack laughed. “Absolutely not. I’m going to get my wife back.”

“We should pummel you to a pulp,” Edward, who’d been silent up until now, drawled.

Jack nodded. It was true. He deserved it. “You should but. . .”

Anthony put a hand on Edward’s shoulder. “The father of our nephew should be alive for the birth.”

“He could be a cripple,” put in James.

“A bit of limp wouldn’t hurt,” added Edward.

Jack faced the wall of Cordelia’s well-meaning brothers, undaunted. His wife needed him. And he needed to get to her as quickly as possible. Wherever that might be. “All of this is true gentlemen but we are wasting time. You may pummel me at a later date and I shan’t resist. But we must find her. Did she say anything, anything at all?”

Anthony scowled. “Deuced odd, but she said the barrow. There are hundreds of them and—”

Relief flooded through Jack and he couldn’t stop the smile that pulled at his lips and at his heart. Jack darted for the door, shouting over his shoulder, “I know where she is. I’ll find her. You stop the annulment.”

He didn’t pause, or think, or even bother to snatch up a coat. Jack Eversleigh darted out into the world, ready to finally declare he was in love with his *wife* and nothing was going to take that away from him.

CHAPTER 31

The Dukes' Club country house
Late afternoon

Cordelia picked up a small, horsehair brush from the planks set up as a table in the field by the barrow and swept it over the piece of harness they'd discovered this morning in the debris near the burial.

She focused on it very carefully, very slowly, extracting the dirt from the beaten gold. If she studied it and toiled over it, she wouldn't have to think about what must be done next. That she'd have to go abroad, Naples perhaps, to have her child, and then. . . And then? Well, she didn't know. She'd think of something.

It was terrifying feeling so alone. She couldn't even ask Kathryn to go with her. The duchess was already four months along and the last thing Cordy wished was to add to her kind friend and patron's concerns.

She supposed the fear would dissipate as she grew more accustomed to the situation. After all, she already loved the growing child in her belly. But, oh, how her heart ached, knowing she would never see Jack again, but at least she could respect herself. She'd not been low enough to trap him as his grandmother, the surprising, kind old bat, had suggested. For years, all she'd longed for was freedom. She would not now in turn, deny such a thing to the man she loved.

"I think you've removed all the dirt."

Cordy stopped mid-brush, her heart jumping into her throat. It couldn't be. It couldn't be him. But she knew that rich, sensual voice anywhere. "It's important to be thorough," she said, forcing herself to be calm.

There was a long beat of silence before he said gently, "You weren't going to tell me?"

Her shoulders sagged and any hope that might have sparked in her heart just a moment ago dimmed. He had not come here for her. He'd come because he knew. He knew that now, forever, they'd be linked by the child growing in her womb. It was the strangest thing, to love the baby in her body, even though it promised to add incredible difficulty to her life and incite obligation, not love, in the man she'd given her heart to. "No. I was not."

He took a step forward and laid his strong hand upon her shoulder. "Why?"

Her entire body came alive at his touch and she longed to turn to him, to slip into his embrace and accept the protection he'd, no doubt, come to give her. But she couldn't bear looking at him, so she lifted her gaze to the barrow. She studied the stakes and string which had been used to mark sections of the dig. "You made it rather clear how you felt the last time I saw you."

His touch slid to the nape of her neck, his fingers winding into the curls. "I was afraid."

Good lord, that simple, soft touch pulsed through her and stole all her reason. She wouldn't be swayed. She wouldn't. She had to remain firm in her resolve to give him his freedom and keep her honor. She wouldn't take a man who only wished her because of the child within her. "Pardon?"

"I was afraid, Cordy," he whispered, angling his body so it shielded her from the salty wind sweeping up from the coast. "Of being different than I always have been, of how I've always expected to be."

She shook her head, not willing to give herself hope as she'd done before. He didn't love her. He never had. "I don't understand."

"Will you look at me?"

She bit down on her lower lip, seeking a strength that had always been there for her in the past, which seemed to have scampered off in her lovelorn days. Lifting her chin, she turned towards him and shifted her gaze to meet his dark one. It was nearly her undoing, looking upon the face she loved so well. Clearing her throat, she lifted a brow, determined not to open herself as she'd done before. "Yes?"

"I had to run from you."

She snorted. "You did not."

A glint of humor brightened his dark eyes. "I did. And if you'll listen, you'll know why."

Grudgingly, she folded her arms under her breast, brush still in hand, ready to go back to her work.

He drew in a deep breath then began, "You were making me see I didn't have to be that person. I'd been told all my life that I wasn't good. That I didn't deserve anything and you. . . Glorious you insisted that I did. That it wasn't my actions, but my father's pain which had shaped me."

She stared at him, disbelieving the words coming out of his mouth. At last she said, "I still believe that to be true."

"And now, so do I."

She eyed him carefully, unwilling to leap. She needed him to say exactly how he felt. She would assume nothing. Assumptions had gotten her nowhere. “What does that mean exactly?”

His face grew serious and shockingly vulnerable. “It means I want you to be my wife. I want you to give me a chance to prove to you that I am a good man.”

“I already know that you are a good man,” she said, tears stinging her eyes. “But I will not have you simply because we are to have a child. Most women would—”

“You aren’t most women, Cordy. You are a strong, tenacious woman who deserves everything this world has to offer and I want to give it to you. You say I am a good man? Will you stand with me? While I discover it? Will you let me love you as you deserve while I am loved in turn. . . As I deserve.”

She put the down the brush, desperate to jump into his arms. Yet, she couldn’t. She’d leapt before and crashed to the ground. “I want to, with all my heart. . .”

He nodded. “But it is you who is now afraid?”

“I gave you my heart and—”

“I didn’t realize I could accept it, sweetheart,” he said gently. “But now I know that I can have you. We’ve been given a gift. A remarkably blessed gift. I never thought I could be a father or that a woman would wish to be with me long enough to raise a babe. But you did. You pursued me and did everything in your power to wake me up from the nightmare I’d been living in. I love you. I loved you then. I love you now. I will love you every day of my life.”

A tear slipped down her cheek as he spoke the words she’d longed to hear for so long. “How do I believe that you will feel this way tomorrow?”

“We can never know what tomorrow brings.” He took her hands in his. Softly. Reverently. “We can only trust in today. But every day, we can work to ensure that our love will be strong tomorrow.”

She drew in an astounded breath. “When did you become so wise?”

“Since I met my wife.”

Another tear slipped down her cheek and she pulled her hand from his to dash it away. “Silly emotions.”

He caught her fingers then, oh so gently, stroked that tear with his thumb. “Your emotions are as beautiful as your intellect.”

“Flatterer.”

Cupping her cheek in his palm, he whispered, “I intend to flatter you every day for the rest of your life. So you best get used to it.”

It hardly seemed possible, what he was saying. But it was true. He was here and the look in his eyes was full of hope, of love. "I shall endeavor."

"Good," he said brightly. "Now, there is something I want you to do with me."

"Yes?" She'd do anything to celebrate the moment he'd realized he was worthy of love. She'd march to the bloody Antipodes or have tea with his grandmother.

"Come with me to my home and say goodbye to my father and my brother with me. Help me say goodbye to the past so that I can have a future with you and our child."

Cordelia drew in a deep breath, barely able to believe she was standing with the same man who'd been so sure he'd deserved nothing but pain. But here he was, before her, his dark eyes full of wonder. "Yes." A laugh tumbled from her. "Yes. I will."

A smile lifted his lips, parting them with pure joy. Greedily, he took her in his arms and swung her around. "I love you, duchess. I love you."

Holding tightly to his shoulders, her feet barely dancing upon the ground, she felt as light as air. "And I you."

"And I love our child. I will always love it. Whoever it is, whatever happens." He tilted her head back, pulling her close. "Our child will always know that there is hope and love in this world."

And she knew it was true. Their child would know the love and safety that they never had, because they loved each other. Because they were willing to accept each other, no matter how rough their road had been. Between them, love would always triumph.

CHAPTER 32

One month later

The annulment had gone through. And for one fascinating week, he and Cordelia had not been married at all. Lest she change her mind and bolt for the continent, Jack had immediately procured a special license and they had been married in a hasty but perfect ceremony at the house where they had first made love. Harris had tossed the flowers.

Aston had stood quite sheep-faced in the corner, begging both Jack and Cordy's forgiveness for giving such terrible, drunken advice. That dastardly duke along with the Basingstoke brothers, Charles, Gemma, both dowager duchesses and the Duke and Duchess of Darkwell had then toasted them again and again with ever flowing glasses of champagne.

Now, they stood a good hundred miles away from that house that had brought them together. He and Cordy stood before the intimidating Hunt family crypt. Though he knew he was a man well over six feet in height, he felt about three feet high. A little boy, standing before his father.

But Cordelia was with him and the strength she gave him bolstered his heart and resolve. The crimson flowers in his hand were not the traditional white lilies of mourning. No, they were the boisterous flowers of life.

"Are you ready?" she asked.

He nodded. And he stepped up to the tall, marble memorial which encased the remains of his eldest brother and the man who had held him responsible for his great bitterness. Atop the crypt stood an avenging angel, his arms wrapped about the reproduction of his brother's likeness, stealing him from this earth. Carefully, Jack placed the flowers at the angel's feet. Instead of bowing his head, he stared straight on at the towering memorial. "Father, you suffered greatly in your life and I know now that suffering had nothing to do with me. You're with my brother now. And you're both safe and happy together. I know you know it wasn't my fault he died. That life happens. Now, there will be a new Eversleigh. No one can ever replace you or my eldest brother, but life goes on. And we shall be happy, remembering you, not mourning you."

Cordelia reached out and took his hand. Her slender fingers slid around his and squeezed. It was enough. He'd passed through the bitter part of his life and emerged stronger, more fulfilled, than he ever could have imagined. He glanced down at his wife, observing the small curve to her waist and smiled. "Thank you, my love."

She merely smiled, knowing she need say nothing in this moment.

Jack drew in a breath and took one last look at the memorial. His breath caught in his throat for the angel that had always terrified him was smiling. "Cordy—"

"Yes?"

Jack hesitated, sure it could only be a trick of light, but that furious angel now held his brother in the gentlest, kindest of embraces, a loving expression upon his once stern face. "Nothing. It's nothing."

"It's not nothing," she countered. "What is it?"

He let out an exaggerated sigh. "Stop your arguing woman."

"I shan't. Besides I know you like—"

He bent down and stopped her words with a kiss, their lips touching. A symbol of light in the darkness, and with the angel smiling down upon them, Jack knew that everything was going to be all right. In fact, it was going to be more than all right. It was going to be absolutely bloody glorious.

THE END

WISH UPON A DUKE

A DUKES' CLUB NOVEL

By
Eva Devon

BARD PRODUCTIONS

This is a work of fiction. Names, places, characters, and incidents are either the work of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, organizations, events, or locales are entirely coincidental.

Wish Upon A Duke

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For my son and my husband
You two are the reason why.

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CHAPTER I

Duncan Hamish Fergus, the tenth Duke of Blackburn, loathed Sassenachs. Even more so, he loathed house parties thrown by said Sassenachs. He loathed everything about them. Whether it be the shrill giggling of the silly women, the arrogant chest-puffing of the gentlemen, or the way in which they shot every bird that flew through the air, he loathed them. And of all of them, he loathed his neighbor Lady Imogen Cavendish the most.

For some reason that Duncan couldn't quite fathom, Scotland had become popular. Perhaps the lords and ladies of England had simply grown bored with shooting birds on their own land. Now, apparently sickened with ennui, every Englishman who could find a carriage to take him north had cast off their trews and donned a kilt. Knobby knees or no.

It was enough to make a Scots' man weep.

All those bloody Englishmen apparently, given his frequent hearings and sightings of drunken, merry-making lords, had one destination. Lady Cavendish's hunting lodge. Yesterday's report of a particularly loathsome sighting had been the straw that broke the proverbial camel's back.

Duncan strode over the frost-covered heather, bent on confronting Lady Cavendish once and for all. He could have sent his man. Most would. But for once, he wanted to vent his full rage upon the ridiculous woman, who was as useful as a soft slipper upon a Highland ben.

He loved the Highlands in winter, silent except for the wild wind, bitter cold, and brushed with God's own perfect snow. He should have been enjoying his solitude and management of his estates, not herding a Sassenach woman like a sheepdog worries an errant sheep. But he was. And he was going to give her a setdown that would have her running for London and all its sinful pleasures.

He gazed up at the crisp sky that was shockingly blue for the first week of December and the last week of the hunting season. It should have been full white, heavy with snow, or wicked gray full of slashing rain. But no. It had to be marvelously blue. Which of course meant that the idiocy of Lady Cavendish's guests would only escalate above their already foolhardy state. Good weather

meant excessive sport, and he'd be bloody damned if he was going to let another gun wander onto his estate without his permission.

He didn't permit shooting for entertainment on his land. It was a damned foolish occupation, picking birds out of the sky because a man had nothing better to do. Almost any occupation was better, and certainly kinder to the animals that graced the land.

The gurgling of a rushing stream filled the air, and he headed down toward it. The silvery bit of water marked the end of his estate and the beginning of a small tract of land belonging to the Englishwoman. Why in God's name an English widow would wish to have a small bit of the Highlands was beyond him, except for the fact she seemed to like to invite hordes of Sassenachs and behave as though her tiny patch of land was Sodom and Gomorrah.

It should have been a pleasant day.

He should have been out managing the herds of great Highland cattle.

He should have been speaking with tenants, assuring them that Scotland's woes were behind them now that Parliament, in all its pompous wisdom, had decided to ease many of the cruel laws against the Northerners.

But it wasn't.

Frankly, any day a Scot had to come face-to-face with a Sassenach since the Battle of Culloden was a bad one.

Just as he was about to swipe at an ancient and massive holly bush, despite its prickly leaves, he curved around the foliage and bashed into a soft form. His foot caught in the long hem of a cape, and he slipped on the wet grass.

A feminine yelp of dismay burst from said soft form, and just before he could land full bore atop the woman, he twisted his body, wrapped his arms around her slight form, and took the force of their tumble, landing on his back.

Every single one of her womanly curves seemed pressed against his body.

He held absolutely still. For surely, if he held absolutely still, his mind would stop the sudden riot that had commenced within his usually perfectly ordered head.

As a rule, he didn't clasp women to his frame.

Over the years, he'd exuded a ferocious amount of control over his animal appetites. Good dukes acted in a manner that couldn't be gainsaid by the nosiest biddy in the village. In the Highlands, any activity that he might have engaged in outside of the marriage bed would be fodder for the gossips. Fodder was not something he was prepared to be. So, the gentle, pliant curves of the young lass were a bit of shock against his hard frame.

As was her scent.

Soft rosemary and lavender wafted around him, and he had the most perverse desire to lift his head and bury his face in her loosely bound hair. As it was, it was all he could do not to yield to the sudden temptation the fates had thrown in his path and pull her tightly to him and savor every damn curve she possessed.

A laugh, rich and full of merriment, tumbled from her. “Goodness! Were you gathering wool?”

He blinked at those suitable words. He had indeed been “wool-gathering.” But that was not what gave him a sudden dose of distemper. The damned woman had the accent of the oppressors. And given the weave of the fine wool beneath his fingers, this was she. The Sassenach woman who gave sin a bad name.

He should have pushed her away immediately. Even though he was a duke, he couldn’t ignore the fact that he was also just a man. Holy God, didn’t the woman feel like heaven even if she was straight from the fiery pit of hell?

“It was most gallant of you to protect me from the hard ground,” she said, “but perhaps we could stand now, or are you incapacitated in some way?”

He cleared his throat. Yes. They should stand. But he didn’t want to. In fact, quite contrary to good sense, he wanted to roll her over, slide up her skirts, and take her body in a way he hadn’t had a woman since his days in France. Duncan clenched his jaw lest he say something utterly moronic. He was not about to let her think he was some Highland barbarian.

She wiggled, then let out a sound of astonishment. “I say, are you wearing a kilt?”

“Yes,” he gritted, affected by said wiggle in a way that he was not going to be able to keep hidden for long. Apparently, years of self-denial had not prepared him for such a circumstance. If anything, they seemed to make him more vulnerable to his predicament. God’s teeth, but she felt good.

She squirmed, this time her body caressing him in a multitude of places.

Another merry laugh escaped her small person. “I think it has gone askew.”

Her hand tickled his upper thigh.

He jerked against her touch.

“Do forgive me,” she said. “Terribly rude, I know, but I’ve never met a man in a kilt.”

He tensed and fought a groan. What kind of woman tickled a man’s naked thigh? A no-good one. That’s what kind. “I’ll have you know, woman, a kilt is a perfectly correct piece of clothing for this country.”

“Oh, I couldn’t agree more. I think it would be agreeable in *any* country, if you must know.” She reached down and gave his hem a tug, apparently trying to cover him. Something that should have cooled their situation but did not. The soft skim of her fingers over his thigh forced him to bite back a soft sigh of pleasure.

“I adore it,” she continued, clearly unaware of his state of torture. “I don’t know why more men don’t wear them. They seem to be far more practical for a man’s. . . um. . . Well, they’re more practical.”

At that, he could no longer suppress his groan. He was discussing the freedom of a man’s cock in a kilt with a Sassenach noblewoman. Surely, he’d conked his head on a rock when he’d fallen. Yes. That had to be it. When he stood, he’d see yon stone with a bit of blood on it, and he’d feel much better about himself knowing all this was a figment of his overactive imagination.

But a quick check seemed to suggest that his head was pressed against rough Highland grass. He closed his eyes for a long moment, then opened them. No. She was still there, gazing down at him. Her damned beautiful face was as pretty as any Scottish lass he could have imagined. Now, what had she been saying? Och. . .

Didn’t she know that ladies were not supposed to discuss a man’s nether regions? Those nether regions were behaving in a most unruly fashion at present. His cock liked her. In fact, it was hard and preening for her attention, a most alarming thing, considering she was the enemy and supposedly the object of his loathing.

She wiggled again, her full skirts sliding over his calves and the ground about them. “I do beg your pardon, but would you mind easing your grip? Your hands are quite strong.”

It took him a moment to evaluate his entire physical predicament, and not just his groin, but he was indeed pressing his hands into her back, holding her tight to his chest. In a damned possessive way, no less.

She wasna someone he wished to possess. She was everything a man such as he should wish to dismiss! And as quickly as possible. Yet, like his traitorous cock, his hands seemed to have other ideas. In fact, those damned appendages longed to roam in a southerly direction, to cup her buttocks to see if they were as delightfully round and lush as the rest of her.

She smiled down at him, a devilishly charming smile. “Not to complain overmuch, for you are quite a handsome specimen, but I am gaining a crick in my neck.”

It was true, she did have to hold her head up to stare down at his face. As if to illustrate the discomfort of the position, she lowered her head to rest her cheek on his shoulder.

His breath caught in his chest. Why the bleeding hell would she do such a thing? Such an intimate, trusting gesture. The Highlands weren't safe. He could be a rover, for God's sake. He could roll her onto her back and take her, will she or will she no', in a moment. He blinked. What was he to make of her? Though her actions suggested she was a simpleton, her gaze had been that of an intelligent, if infuriating, woman.

"Any time will do," she said simply against his wool coat. "Though, I must admit, you do feel quite nice. And you've the decided and lovely scent of juniper." She gave a sniff to the curve of his neck. "Very nice."

A growl emanated from his throat.

That was enough. Enough to prove she was just as scandalous as he'd accused her of a thousand times in his mind over the last months. And if he didn't act now, he was going to lose his mind and prove no better than the rover he'd just considered.

He shoved her up and over, landing her with slightly less grace than he'd like, onto her bum.

She gave a startled cry, then peered up at him, her brow quirked. "Famous! You've thrown me over, and all I was doing was minding my own holly tree."

He scowled at her, then looked to said holly tree. On the ground, just to the right of the base of the ancient prickly foliage was a basket filled with green sprigs, bright with red berries.

Rolling up into a sitting position, he ensured his kilt was adjusted in such a manner that she couldn't see anything of import. Still, her almond-eyed gaze seemed drawn to his legs.

Her pale cheeks, already pink with the brisk cold, positively glowed rose. She arched a blond brow. "My, you *do* have fine legs."

"My *limbs* are none of your business," he scoffed, nearly flummoxed by her continued boldness.

She laughed, an irritatingly delightful sound, then adjusted her own full, flowing skirts over her ankles. "Well, if you shouldn't wish ladies to comment on them, you shouldn't show them in such fine fashion."

Duncan jumped to his feet and turned away, lest she see his discomfiture. The last time he'd discussed limbs with a woman had been before he'd become

the Duke of Blackburn, and, well, the sudden tone of the conversation was turning his head. And not the one he was accustomed to thinking with.

“Woman, I’ll have you know that you are the first in years to mention anything about my person.”

She clucked her tongue, her gloved hands propping her up. “That is a tragedy, good sir. For you’ve a fine personage and seem much the gentleman. Doesn’t your wife compliment you? She should.”

He cleared his throat. How in the devil did she manage to converse so fluidly about such scandalous things? Practice, he’d wager. “There is no wife at present, and if there were, she’d never stoop to such low discourse.”

The young woman cocked her head, a blond curl tumbling against her cheek in a damned charming manner. “Indeed not? How very dreary your lives would be then. So, perhaps it’s best you are a bachelor.”

“And did you speak thus to your husband?” he demanded, a sudden indignation flaring up. He knew Lady Cavendish to be a widow. But he wouldn’t allow such censure from her. Hell, the woman would have him be a gray old nanny what with his thoughts of propriety. “I suppose you discussed each and every one of his body parts in detail!”

Her pink lips parted in a grin, and she laughed. Again. “Why such a thing would be so terrible between a man and his wife, I can’t imagine.”

He scowled. She couldn’t see the harm? Married couples, from his experience, needed to act with propriety above all else. Still, he felt quite curious. Did she truly discuss things so openly with her husband, and perhaps other men now? “So, you did then?”

Her smile dimmed. “It is none of your business, of course, but if you must know, no. My husband was nearly forty years my senior. We discussed little.”

Then where was all this sauciness learned, he wanted to demand. He didn’t. But it was incredibly tempting. It was obvious from her sudden lack of mirth that her marriage had been a sad one. He felt a moment’s hesitation in condemning her for a English hussy, but no. He couldn’t yield. The moment he started thinking well of her was the moment he might start allowing himself to slip.

She braced her hands on the earth, leaning forward. “Would you mind helping me up, or am I too much the shocking, scarlet woman for you?”

“I never said that,” he rebutted, feeling a quick dose of embarrassment. He prided himself on his manners, even if she had none, and he’d left her on her bum on the cold ground.

She stretched out a gloved hand. “It was implied by your every sneer.”

"I don't sneer," he sneered. He caught himself and groaned. "I'm in an ill humor."

"Thank goodness that this is not your good humor," she drawled.

He took her small hand in his and carefully pulled her to her feet. She was quite short. In fact, she didn't come up to his shoulder. "If you must know, I was on my way to see you."

She batted her lashes. "Me? How do you even know who I am?"

"Are you not Lady Cavendish?"

"I am!" She leaned toward him. "How did you know?"

He gave her an incredulous stare. "You're the only Englishwoman for miles."

"What of my guests?" she pointed out.

"From what I can tell, you only have men to visit."

"Gentlemen," she said lightly. "There's a difference. I do have ladies to visit also. And you're sneering again."

He snorted. "Well, your *gentlemen* are too high-handed when it comes to Highland hospitality. They came onto my land and shot my birds."

"How terrible that your birds were shot," she said, smoothing her skirts. "But impossible that they were my guests."

Narrowing his eyes, he challenged, "Are you calling me a liar, madam?"

"Not at all, simply misinformed." She paused, then brushed her gloved hands over her upper arms. "It's quite cool. Would you care to come to my abode? A warm drink should improve both our spirits, don't you think?"

He'd rather go to hell and back than with the beautiful, infuriating woman. "My spirits can't be improved until I've had your assurance there will be no more trespassing. If I find another unwelcome person upon my land, he'll be the one shot for sport. Not my grouse."

"My goodness!" she exclaimed as if somehow amused by his threat. "How very bold."

"You're in the Highlands now, and in this region, I'm the law."

"How fortunate for you." She batted her lashes innocently. "And you are?"

As if she couldn't surmise from what he'd just told her. She had to take delight in nettling him. "The Duke of Blackburn, madam."

"Your Grace!" she exclaimed, her breath puffing white in the cold air. She gave the tiniest of curtsies. "What a delight. I've been longing to make your acquaintance, but you're never at home when I call."

He stared silently, hoping she'd realize he'd been deliberately avoiding her.

“Fate clearly meant for us to meet,” she said, nodding.

He drew himself up, squaring his shoulders against her silliness. “Fate, madam?”

“What else could it be, what with us colliding quite literally?”

“Deep misfortune,” he observed.

She tsked. “Am I as bad as all that?”

He arched a brow and looked her over from top to bottom. Good God, she was stunning. Voluptuous. Slightly plump. But plump in a way that made him wish to grab her and take handfuls of her tempting body. He harumphed.

“I say”—her blond brows drew together—“you seem quite young, but are you actually an old man?”

“I beg your pardon?” How was it possible that she said such things to him? It was beyond him. Every rational part of him demanded he turn on his heel and leave, but there was another part of him, a deeper, insidious part, that whispered, *How bloody refreshing*. Clearly, it was a voice that couldn’t be trusted.

She shrugged, as if what she was about to say was actually self-evident. “Well, I’ve never known a fellow under the age of sixty to scowl so ferociously and make such a grumpy noise.”

“Grumpy?” he echoed.

“Indeed.” She batted her long lashes at him. “Are you a grump?”

Grump? “Are you mad?”

“Oh, a trifle, I daresay.” She pulled the ties of her cloak tighter and adjusted her hood against the breeze. “This life does make us all a little moon merry.”

“I can assure you,” he said tightly, “I have every ounce of sense about me.”

She pursed that gorgeous pink mouth, then nodded with an air of exaggerated tragedy, clearly surmising he was a lost cause. “It seems so.”

Her tone gave the decided impression that she felt pity for him. Him! A duke. “Now, see here,” he began, “I’ve put up with your carryings-on for some time. But now? Now, I insist you run your house with a bit more decorum.”

“Insist?” She lifted her chin, not giving an inch under his censure. “Sir, you have not the authority to insist anything on my land. Land, which you are standing upon. Now, I will make certain that none of my dukes go on your own dukely land. But I will have you know, I don’t approve of shooting animals for sport either. So, we’re in agreement. If one of my guests did behave in such a reprehensible manner, I shall certainly ask him to leave. But beyond that, I haven’t done a jot wrong, so take your judgments and hie off.”

The trail of her discourse slipped through his mind, one word resonating. “Dukes?” he echoed, hardly believing a word she’d said. Except. . . Had she just instructed him to hie off?

She nodded tightly. “Yes, Your Grace. I’ve three dukes to stay at present.”

“English dukes?” he bit out.

She stared at him as if he were the mad person here. “Would you know them if they were not?”

She had a point. But Jesus wept. Three English dukes not a stone’s throw from his own land? It was enough to make him bleed with the agony of English aggression and power. Couldn’t they just have a bit of peace where only the hardiest Scots and sheep dared to tread the bens and vales?

“Well, madam,” he said, drawing upon his superiority as a Scot. Except. . . Well, except there was something rather grand about her. Still, she wasna for him. Not even for a moment. “If you keep your guests on your land, we shall have no further problems.”

“Fine then,” she said, her earlier smiles gone.

“Fine,” he agreed and lingered. Now was the moment. The moment he should turn on his booted heel and march back up the hill and over the frosted heather. But he couldn’t quite force himself to move. There was something aggravatingly captivating about the wee woman who had grown quite indignant under his censure.

She folded her arms beneath her plump breasts. “If that will be all, I shall go back to gathering holly. You did turn down my offer of hospitality, you recall.”

He scowled.

Her beautiful, full lips pursed again, almost begging for a kiss. “You do that a good deal, Your Grace.”

He couldn’t tear his gaze away from those lips of hers. Och, wouldna they feel magnificent beneath his own? “What?”

“Look as if you’ve sucked upon a lemon,” she stated simply. “Which is quite the tragedy, as you’ve a remarkably handsome face.”

Her words penetrated his frustrating reverie and reignited his decision that she wasna to be trifled with. “Blazes, woman. Must you?”

“What?”

“Have you no sense of decorum?” he challenged, wondering if she’d even try to defend her actions. “You’re complimenting me again.”

“Sin upon sin,” she said with exaggerated shock. “Chapter and verse, the good Lord surely has condemned me to the fiery pits for saying pleasant things.”

“Pleasant?” he demanded, then felt the need to correct her. Did she not understand the effects she had upon a man? “Incendiary!”

That damn grin of hers came back, brightening her infuriatingly winsome face. Did she no’ know that people shouldn’t brighten under his criticism? They should recant. Then reform. “Why are you smiling, woman?”

It was her turn to look him up and down, a cheeky glint to her eyes. “I was just wondering which part of you I’d set ablaze.”

Did she now? He drew in a slow breath, trying to think of the cold. Of the frost upon the ground. Of the lowering clouds now speeding in overhead. Anything to stop the damn heat of desire her very presence seemed to evoke in his usually proper person. And, well, he simply couldn’t allow such a thing. “Good day, madam. Keep your guests on your own property, and we shant have the misfortune of each other’s company again.”

“Are you certain you wouldn’t wish to return to my lodge for a cup of hot wine?”

He tensed, then peered down at her, determined to make his moral position known. “I’m going to the nearest loch, and I’m going to cast myself in it.”

“Why?”

“To put out your damnable blaze.” He could hardly believe he’d blathered such a thing. But he had. Something about her weakened his wits. All the more reason for him to depart.

“If you must, but don’t catch your death.” She gave a full shiver, which only caused her beautiful breasts to plump.

He yanked his gaze away from the scandalous sight, turned on his booted heel, and strode in her opposite direction. As quickly as possible.

As he gained a bit of distance, his shoulders relaxed, and he gave a small sigh.

And then he heard it. A wee, soft, womanly voice on the wind. “Good-bye, Your Grace! It was my pleasure to meet you!”

He refused to turn. No matter how much an irrational little whisper urged him. Instead, he harumphed. And then he nearly kicked himself.

He wasn’t an old man who harumphed at everything. He stopped dead in his tracks over the next hill. Or was he? Was he simply waiting for a stick to pound the ground and call everyone about him whippersnappers?

The thought was an astonishing one. Had he truly gone from being simply a proper duke to a—what had she said? Oh yes. A *grump*?

Duncan shuddered. Well, it mattered not. He wouldna be seeing her anytime soon again, and even if he was a grump, he was a responsible and capable duke. Unlike his father. That was all that mattered.

His land mattered. His people mattered. Not a wee, golden-haired lass with lips to lure a man into a lifetime of sin.

CHAPTER 2

*I*t was a miracle Lady Imogen Cavendish wandered back into her own foyer. She'd been rather adrift for the last hour as she'd contemplated her neighbor. In fact, she'd been so deep and lost in thoughts of the towering Scot whose face had delighted her in the most astonishing of ways, that she could have wandered all the way to York for all she knew. But no. She'd only sauntered back to her large hunting lodge, as if after several months, her feet had been trained to the Highland paths. And, well, hadn't she decided to make the place home?

Imogen dropped her basket onto the Chippendale table in her entry hall, then tugged at the ribbon of her cloak. What a strange occurrence it had been! He'd looked upon her as black as thunder, his dark hair a riot over his stern brow. Oh, but his eyes! Sapphire eyes, the color of the brightest gem, sparked with warmth.

She was still tingling from the strength of that gaze. She'd asked the locals about the Duke of Blackburn, of course, when he'd always been out when she called. They'd all spoken in such reverent tones of the man, she'd assumed he would be a willowy, saintly sort of fellow, all silver-haired or bespectacled.

But he'd been nothing like a saint! More like a hellfire preacher who'd been cast by a God who loved a beautiful male form. He'd certainly looked upon her as if she were Mary Magdalene, and she couldn't help nettling him, poor man. She sighed. He'd been quite rude.

But she liked him.

And that was a great misfortune, because he almost certainly was going to avoid her at all costs, prude that he seemed to be.

She tugged off her cloak. How on earth did such a man become a prude? In her varied experience, beautiful men were almost always rakes. This handsome devil had barely known how to converse with her. She couldn't imagine him seducing a lady in a shadowed ballroom, let alone a glen.

"Imogen!" Kathryn, Duchess of Darkwell, called from the top of the wide, oak staircase. "Did you have a good walk?"

Imogen beamed up at her friend. The duchess was positively glowing. Her long, blond hair fell in splendid curls about her pale face, and the young woman rested a hand atop her rounded belly.

“I did!” Imogen exclaimed. “I wish you’d come, for I had such a sight!”

Kathryn’s eyes widened. “Did you? I’m dying for a bit of scandal. Ryder has kept me upstairs all day, as if I were one of the porcelain shepherdesses so popular these days. Now, I’ve ordered a large tea for the drawing room.”

But from the blush that betrayed Kate’s cheeks, Imogen felt certain that Ryder, the Duke of Darkwell, had kept his beloved wife upstairs for an altogether different reason than to put her entirely untouched upon the shelf.

“Come,” she said, politely ignoring her friend’s misplaced blushes. “Let us wait for tea together.”

Imogen grabbed the folds of her skirts and bounded up the stairs. Perhaps it was silly, but she liked to hold Kate’s hand and go down the stairs with her. Imogen was extremely protective of her friend’s delicate state. In fact, Kate couldn’t go anywhere without someone trying to take her arm. Still, her friend took it all in stride, with no hint of resentment. It seemed nothing could daunt the young duchess’ newfound joy.

Though Imogen would never admit it, not in a lifetime of Sundays, she was just the tiniest bit jealous of her dearest friend. Kathryn had found love and a husband who worshipped her from the tips of her toes to the curls upon her head. He was besotted, impassioned, and a complete idiot in his boundless love. And there was very little more marvelous to see. . . Except, at Darkwell’s request, she’d invited the Duke of Hunt and his new wife, Cordelia. Imogen had yet to lay eyes upon them, but according to Kathryn, the couple was positively, madly in love.

Imogen took her friend’s hand, and they descended the slightly steep stairs and sashayed into the blue drawing room, done up in sapphire damask and a stunning Bluebell and cream Axminster rug. This was to be the last house party of the hunting season, though she didn’t permit her guests to hunt, and she was going to be surrounded by couples in love.

Well, at least that was better than couples sniping at each other, as the last group had done. She didn’t know what she’d been thinking with her last guest list. Perhaps she’d hoped the beautiful landscape would revitalize her friends as it had done for herself.

She loved London and all that was to be done there. Scandal and bacchanalia had long been her favorite sources of amusement, but on her last visit to the Highlands, she’d purchased an establishment immediately and stayed. Something about the crisp air, wild mountains, and rushing streams had touched her soul in a way no London party could.

“Do tell me what happened!” Kate demanded, as she lumbered to a chair and lowered herself with that slight, adorable clumsiness that all enceinte women had.

Imogen chose a seat just beside her friend overlooking the sea loch. Even from the drawing room, she could see the reflection of the tallest ben in the area on the silvery waves. It struck her suddenly as an image of Blackburn came to mind—dark, muscled, kilted, striding away from her over the heather. He belonged in such a place. Unlike most of the men who came to visit her from England, the Duke of Blackburn had seemed completely at home in the haunting landscape.

She let out a murmur of pleasure.

“You look like the cat that got the cream.”

“Correction.” Imogen laughed ruefully. “I’m the cat that saw the cream. Alas, I didn’t get any.”

“Pardon?”

The tall, gold-engraved door swung open, and Mairi, the upstairs maid, came in, her chestnut curls rioting out of her cap. She quickly carried a tray laden with several culinary dainties to the carved wood table between Imogen and Kate.

Kate clapped her hands as she eyed the fruited bread. “Thank you. How marvelous.”

Mairi gave a quick curtsy, then bustled out.

Without waiting on ceremony, Kate grabbed a slice of the luxurious bread and took a bite. “Now, what’s this about seeing the cream?”

Imogen, who could usually eat a whole plate of lemon tarts without even a thought, held back from seizing a slice. “Well, if you must know, I finally met him.”

“Who?”

Imogen rolled her eyes. “The Duke of Blackburn, of course.”

“Oh!” Kathryn took a good-size bite, and her eyes fluttered shut with delight. “Is he as saintly as we’ve heard? Does he wear a hair shirt?”

“He wore a kilt.”

Kathryn’s eyes snapped open. “Oooh! I’ve yet to see a man in a kilt. Though, this one likely didn’t do the garment justice. Saintliness and good legs don’t usually go hand in hand.”

Imogen poured two cups of tea, heaping in spoonfuls of sugar. “Well. . .”

Kathryn’s gaze widened. “My stars! Imogen, you’re blushing.”

Imogen shifted uncomfortably. She couldn't be blushing. She'd seen enough sin to keep her pleasantly unshockable. . . And yet, my goodness. The man had fairly smoldered with his displeasure. And he *had* liked her. Despite his rather acerbic tongue, she was convinced it was because she had somehow shaken him. "He ran into me."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Quite literally," Imogen explained, before taking a fortifying sip of tea. "We ended up in a delightful heap upon the ground."

Kathryn waggled her brows. "And his kilt?"

"In absolute disarray," Imogen confessed with glee. "But, alas, he was a gentleman."

Kathryn gave a little sigh of disappointment. "That's likely a good thing. Too many men are randy as goats. It's nice to know there are some who can control themselves."

"Oh, I've a feeling the Duke of Blackburn is all about controlling himself."

"Indeed?" Kate cradled her teacup in her palm in a most unladylike fashion, no doubt needing the warmth.

One thing that was difficult was, no matter how many layers one wore or how many logs were placed upon the fire, the Highlands were cold.

Imogen wondered if Blackburn could keep her warm. . .

"Imogen? Imogen!"

"Hmmm?" she murmured, recalling the strength of his thighs beneath her accidental caress.

"You were saying?" Kate prompted.

"Oh." She shook herself. "Yes. Well, he was most perplexed by our situation. Hardly knew what to do and held me a good deal longer than necessary. He's exceptionally handsome." Imogen winked. "So I didn't mind terribly."

"Hmmm." Kate's brow furrowed as she mulled the situation over. "Perhaps he has kept a handle on his behavior for some time, and you were just too much to resist."

"Resist me he did, though," Imogen said, trying to hide her irritation. "You would have thought I was a bawd of the worst order. In fact, I do think he almost insinuated such a thing."

"Oh dear. I did hear his father was a terrible scoundrel," Kate said around another bite of fruited bread. "Never stayed upon his estate and was always with a new mistress or two in wicked old London."

Imogen sighed. "Clearly, those traits were *not* passed on to his son."

Kathryn nodded. "Perhaps they frighten him."

Imogen thought for a moment. What with the burly broad shoulders, wild black hair, and scorching eyes, it seemed impossible the Duke of Blackburn was afraid of anything. However, Kate made a good point. Perhaps the poor man was afraid that if he dipped his toe into the lake of sin, like his apparently disreputable father, he would toss himself in and drown in the delights of the flesh.

Her gaze blurred. She could only imagine what the duke would look like naked in a lake. In truth, she'd caught glimpses of him swimming. But only glimpses. Further imaginings based on her recent encounter suggested he would look very fine. He'd look very, very fine. All sinew and hard lines, dappled with drops of glistening water. And those legs. . .

"Imooooooooogen!"

She blinked. "Yes. What?"

"Whatever were you thinking? Your grip on your teacup has grown quite tight."

She glanced down at her hand. The knuckles had gone white. Goodness. The duke had moved her in a way that few men did now. Not that she didn't enjoy a good romp. She did. But she was looking for something else these days. Still, it had been some time since she had been with a man.

That had to be it.

Kate clucked her tongue. "You're going to seduce him, aren't you?"

A smile pulled at her lips. "Christmas is coming, after all. A present such as he would be most appreciated."

Hesitating, Kate shifted on her chair. "But do you like him?"

Imogen laughed as an image of his scowling face came to mind. He was nothing like the men of her acquaintance. No, nothing at all. But she did like him. Despite, or because of, his prickliness, she liked him extraordinarily. She wasn't quite ready to say so aloud. Lifting her teacup in salute, she sallied, "Only time shall tell."

Kathryn raised her own cup and laughed. "The poor man doesn't know what's going to hit him."

CHAPTER 3

Duncan yanked off his shirt, then dropped his kilt. The cold, winter breeze coming down off the snowcapped ben hit his body, and he drew in a fortifying breath. The sea loch that stretched all along the line of his great estate (and the line of Lady Cavendish's land) beckoned. He strode, naked as the day he was born, into the frigid water, shivered, then let out a bellow of contentment.

The water was horrendously cold and exactly what he needed. He plunged forward, arm over arm, stroking through the frigid loch. He swam and swam, driving himself harder and harder as he always did on these icy swims.

The damned woman had whipped him into a right lather. Och, she was a bonnie thing, to be sure. But that was hardly reason enough to put him in such a state. It had to have been because they'd been body to body, her head delightfully pressed to his shoulder. Her curving hips had nestled quite perfectly against his cock. In fact, it was a miracle he hadn't lost all sense at that moment, rolled her over, and acted like the Highlanders of old when they wanted to claim a woman.

He took a deep breath and ducked under the water, desperate to shake the lust that had seized his body. Absolute control over his actions and responses to the temptations of this life was something he took pride in. He never over-imbibed. Not in anything. He would not be like his father and leave a wake of broken hearts, debts, and a nearly destroyed clan because of his actions.

The fact that the wee woman from the south had spoken so assuredly, so scandalously, wasn't going to have any long-lasting effect on his resolve. No. A good swim would have her out of his thoughts.

He'd said his piece. He never need see her again. If there were future problems, he'd send his factotum, Alistair, to her.

Duncan bobbed to the surface and swiped his wet hair out of his face.

"And here I thought I was the only man about who could stand a good freezing of the balls."

Duncan tensed, dropped below the water, then splashed back to the surface. Who the everlasting blazes was that? He sputtered water, blinked furiously, and looked for the voice.

“Over here, you sea monster.”

The deep, English voice called from a little closer to the shore.

A russet-haired man waved, his golden earring winking in the late afternoon sun.

Another one.

Another Sassenach.

Two in one day.

Completely out of the blue! Was there an invasion transpiring? Was his castle about to be stormed? Duncan was tempted to dive back under the water and swim to the other side of the shore, but he'd not have the Englishman thinking Scots were cowards. “Who the hell are you?”

“The Duke of Aston, my brawny fellow,” the man declared merrily. “Who the devil are you?”

“The Duke of Blackburn. You're on my land.”

“I don't think so, old chap.”

“Your brain has been affected by the cold water. Clearly, you're not as braw as you've assumed. This is—”

“Lady Imogen Cavendish's bit of loch. I've swum it every day for a week.”

Duncan scowled. This asinine English oppressor was one of *her* guests. And he was handsome.

Duncan growled.

“I say,” the invader called. “You may be a duke, but you've the manners of a tavern devotee.”

Duncan snorted, then struck out for shore. He was not continuing this conversation until he was on dry land. But as he turned to the shore, he froze. He was on *her* land. How the hell had he managed that? He'd somehow swum quickly and far enough to be back upon her property.

Och, that didn't bode well at all. Had his thoughts of her driven his body in that direction?

“Shall we have a drink? One duke to the other?” the Duke of Aston called. “You look like a man who needs a barrel.”

“No, thank you,” he shouted with as much restraint as he could manage.

“No?” the English duke echoed, bobbing happily in the water as if a mystical selkie. “Now, that's just rude.”

Rude, was he? He, the Duke of Blackburn, known far and wide for his good manners and propriety? He ground his teeth together. “Fine then. One drink.”

“Let's fetch our clothes and meet in the middle.”

Duncan eyed Aston's jovial face, wondering how his day could grow any worse. Instead of giving reply, he gave a terse nod and struck out for his clothes.

After a few minutes of swimming, pushing himself, desperate to drive any thoughts of his English neighbors from his mind, he was back on dry land, savoring the punishing feel of cold wind on his wet skin.

"Right!" that damned Englishman hollered. "I know a pub."

The closest pub was a two-mile walk. Nothing too serious, but the sooner he could get this nonsense over the better. "My castle is closer."

The Duke of Aston twirled his hat, which was ridiculously large, out-of-date, and boasted a long, white feather. "Castle, you say? Do you employ serving wenches there?"

Duncan ground his teeth. Why in God's name had he agreed to this ridiculous man's invitation? "I do not."

"Pity," Aston sighed. "My vote is still on for the pub then."

"If you like."

"We'll work up a fine need to drink on the way." Aston clapped his hands in anticipation. "They also serve a mouth-watering rabbit stew."

With rabbits poached from his land, likely. Still, he didn't mind that so much. The working people of his clan and the surrounding areas had known years of hardship. He wasn't about to begrudge them a rabbit or two. English noblemen who poached on his land? Those he'd begrudge. It occurred to him that the Duke of Aston might be one of the idiots who'd shot birds on his land. "Do you do any hunting?"

"Only when a butcher isn't putting meat before me."

"Harumph."

"Not very Scottish, I know. Nor English, for that manner. But I don't care to shoot things for sport," the duke said, a grin pulling his mouth wide, exposing shockingly white teeth. "I hunt to eat when I can't purchase what I need."

When in God's name could that be? Pompous English lords were not known for roughing it.

"Ah. I see the skepticism in your furrowed brow. But I've eaten the strangest of animals in the strangest of lands. . ."

"Surely you accompany Lady Cavendish's guests when they go out hunting?"

"Her guests don't hunt, old fellow. She don't like it, you see. She prefers sporting of a different variety."

The latter statement he could believe, but the former? He'd been instructed by his gamekeeper and his factotum to the contrary. "I wish I could believe you, Aston, but I've it on good authority that her guests do hunt. 'Tis a pity they do so despite her wishes, but when one is lax—"

"I'll not have you disparage Lady Cavendish. Perhaps, just perhaps, Blackburn, it could be your people who are poaching. She's a marvelous scapegrace, an Englishwoman who likes to make merry here in Scotland." Aston shrugged. "Before you consider the lot of us to be rotten, consider who gains most from birds disappearing on your land."

Blackburn rankled. He wanted to roar that such a suggestion was utter nonsense, that his people were utterly loyal, but hadn't he just thought that the local pub might have his rabbits on its menu? Christ. What if Aston was right? What if his gamekeeper was protecting the poachers, to boot? Lady Cavendish would indeed make an easy scape. "Perhaps we shouldn't go on to the pub. I think I need to see my man."

"Balderdash. A good, stiff drink or three will put you in a splendid humor. You should never confront a problem such as Lady Cavendish without a drink."

Duncan arched his brow. "I thought Lady Cavendish had nothing to do with it."

"Ah. She didn't, but since you've been speaking so ill of her, behind her back, it's only fitting that you make it up to her in some way."

Duncan stopped in his tracks and groaned. "Oh, bloody hell."

"Come now." Aston laughed. "I thought you were a proper gentleman and all that."

"No. No. It's just that this morning. . ."

"This morning?" Aston prompted.

"No," Duncan said firmly, picking his pace back up to match Aston's. "I won't be making my apologies until I know for sure."

"Lady Cavendish couldn't hurt a fly," Aston said with absolute certainty as he strode ahead. "And any guest who did so would soon get the ax. Just so you understand why I'm so vehement. We all come here for the air, for the long walks up and down your beautiful land. I don't think the lady even owns a gun. She has a gamekeeper, but only for the management of the animals of the land."

It seemed ludicrous that the English would come up all the way to the farthest-reaching Highlands just for the air. In his experience, the English couldn't go three hours in the country without talking about guns and sport. "Not one of you has gone hunting?"

Aston gave a firm shake of his head, his golden earring winking in the winter light, before giving him a solid clap on the back. "Not a one, old man."

Blackburn scowled at the familiarity. They weren't friends.

"I say, Blackburn, do you have a thistle up your backside?"

Duncan pinned Aston with an incredulous stare. "I beg your pardon?"

"Well, you will go on scowling."

He was tempted to throw up his hands and march off, but they'd already covered the distance to the pub in remarkable time. Earth-scented smoke wafted into the air, and the welcoming lights spilled out into the already darkening landscape.

What was so offensive about his serious nature to his neighbor and her guest? Seriousness should be praised. "A scowl is an appropriate response to your comments."

"Appropriate?" Aston doffed his hat as they strode in through the black oak door. "Bugger appropriate. I was well and done with appropriate when I learned that perfect people are the ones who hide the most."

Blackburn glanced around. He hadn't been into the pub since he was twenty and before his father had died. "What are you suggesting?"

"Now, don't get your kilt in a twist, Blackburn." Aston threw himself down onto a stool near the window, raised his hand, and beckoned a buxom serving wench with a wave of his hand. "My, you are sensitive for a Scot."

Begrudgingly, Duncan sat across from the infuriating Englishman. "What does that mean?"

"Let's get a drink in us."

In a trice, the serving wench, her dark hair piled atop her head, all the better to reveal the tops of her remarkably bountiful breasts, sauntered over and plunked down two tankards of ale. Without a blink of the eye, she bent and gave Aston a kiss on the cheek, and the damned duke patted her bum and gave her a wink before drinking deeply of his ale.

Duncan sat still. It was all he could do not to tell the young woman that her behavior was most scandalous and she should go home to her mother. Then again, this was a pub. Not a kirk. And he wasn't about to offend any of the people who worked hard to earn their bread on his land.

As the bar wench headed to another table, Duncan folded his arms over his chest. "You were saying? Though I don't even know why I'm listening to you."

"I'm a marvelous font of goodwill and knowledge. Everyone is drawn to me." Aston braced his arms against the wood table, fairly overflowing with

arrogance. "It's a curse."

Duncan harumphed before he could stop himself, scowled, then let out a sigh. Perhaps a tankard of ale was just thing. He glanced down at the frothing cup, then lifted it, taking a modest swallow. Once, he'd downed tankard after tankard with the best of them, all while singing and dancing with whatever comely lass came his way. He hesitated. "Why do you say I'm sensitive for a Scotsman? I find you offensive, as any gentleman ought."

Aston gaped for a moment, then guffawed. "Well, in my experience, Scotsmen have skins as thick as elephant hide and give as good as they get. You seem as sensitive as a Dutch tulip."

He slammed his tankard down so hard the table shuddered. "I am not a bloody tulip."

"Here, finish your drink, and I'll order us another one." Aston pushed the tankard back up toward Duncan's mouth, then waved at the barkeep this time.

"I don't want another drink, mon," he growled, even as he brought the mug to his lips and took a swig of the fine, dark brew.

"You do," Aston countered. "A man always wants another drink when he's as indignant as you."

Duncan glowered. "I haven't finished this one."

"Then how about a 'wee dram'?"

"Whisky?" he asked, incredulous. Twinkle-toed Englishmen drank Frenchified brandy. Not God's own nectar, whisky.

"Is there anything finer?" Aston queried.

He supposed that would be acceptable. "My family has been distilling it for ___"

"Good God, man," Aston groaned. "Let's not launch into a history and genealogy of the stuff. Let's just have a drink of it."

Duncan felt a distinct urge to pop the English duke in the mouth. For years, he'd kept his temper in check. He'd not laid hands on a man, except in a practice session, since he'd become the duke. He wasn't going to start now, but the bastard really did beg a good beating.

The barkeep, a man of perhaps sixty with unruly silver hair, stopped before them. "Can I help, Your Graces?"

Duncan peered at the older man. "Angus?"

"Aye, Your Grace."

"I have nae seen you in a decade's time!" He was stunned at the thickness of his own brogue, but it would seem that the day had sufficiently thrown him into

such a temperament that his Sassenach schooling had gone by the wayside. And, in truth, he'd a good mind to give up the rarefied tones of the oppressors and speak as God had intended him to, like a Highlander.

"No, you have nae, Your Grace. And 'tis a right shame, for we've missed you."

Duncan couldn't stop the smile. He stood and took the man's hand. "I'm sorry for it, but duties have made it impossible for me."

"Oh aye, Your Grace." Angus gave a humble nod before breaking into a great grin. "You're a fine laird, and there's no questioning that. Now, His Grace, the Duke of Aston, he's a friendly one."

Friendly? The arse? "Och, say it is nae so? This Sassenach has seduced you with his merry ways?"

Angus laughed. "The English mon has a devil's tongue on him. Too true. Smooth as silver, he is, but he spends his coin and always has a good word for each one of us. If all English were like him, there never would have been time for wars. We'd all have been making merry from sunup to sundown."

"And all the hours between," chimed in Aston.

"'Tis true. 'Tis true, Your Grace."

Duncan could hardly believe it. The English had never been particularly welcome in this part of the Highlands. For many the reason. But here Angus was, friends with the outlander. Duncan hesitated. There was a part of him that wanted to keep believing Lady Cavendish was Jezebel, a devil's handmaiden, and yet, the evidence was pointing in an entirely different direction. "Angus, any of the local lads hired by Lady Cavendish this hunting season?"

"To beat the birds, Your Grace?"

Duncan smiled, turning to Aston, ready to disprove the English bastard. "That's right. Hired many, did she?"

"Not a one."

Duncan's smile fell. "What?"

"Nary a lad," Angus said easily. "She's got them all tending to her infirmary."

"Infirmary," he echoed.

"Oh aye." Angus' face softened like a father cooing over a babe. "Lady Cavendish has a right soft heart. Any wee beastie wounded in the vicinity, or not faring well, is brought to her. She nurses the wee things and has the local lads who are inclined give her a hand."

Nurses them?

Duncan sat, all his surety quickly draining out of him. It didn't bode at all well for his escaping an apology. "So, she's not had any hunters at her house parties?"

Angus shook his head. "Not as any of us has heard. The gentlemen come in for a drink and song, but then head back up to her lodge. Some of the lads take them walking."

"Walking?"

"Aye. Just yesterday young Ned took the Duke of Darkwell up into the bens, searching for stags to spy upon. No guns. Just a basket of sandwiches and a flask of your own whisky."

Aston beamed. "You're up to your neck in it, Blackburn. Unless, of course, you're too big for your kilt to apologize."

"Why should His Grace need to apologize to anyone?" Angus demanded. "He's a right good man."

"Unfortunately," Duncan begrudged, "I made some inaccurate accusations against Lady Cavendish this morning."

Angus' face darkened. "Ya dinna, Your Grace! She's a favorite among the villagers."

"She is?" Duncan felt as if he'd been left completely in the dark. And perhaps it was because he'd been consumed by the larger aspects of running his estates. He hadn't been visiting with the locals in the village for some time. He hadn't asked for gossip because he disapproved of it. So, when reports from his gamekeeper of Lady Cavendish and her guests had reached him, he'd believed them. Why wouldn't he? He had no high opinion of the English to start with.

Duncan groaned.

"Are you unwell, Your Grace?" Angus asked, his face furrowing with concern.

Aston threw back his head and laughed. "He's hungry, Angus."

"Hungry?" the barkeep repeated.

Duncan clamped his mouth shut, not caring at all for the way events had turned this day.

Aston leaned forward, lifted his tankard, and asked in hushed tones, "I don't suppose the pub serves humble pie?"

"Stuff it, Aston, or I'll be yanking out your liver," Duncan gritted.

"Ah. Now that's more like it. No man should be as proper as you all the time. You see, the ale is doing you good."

Duncan grabbed the tankard, downed it, and stood. “It’s been most illuminating.”

“You’ll not stay away so long again, Your Grace?” asked Angus, his rough voice surprisingly hesitant.

Duncan softened. “It’s remiss I’ve been in not paying you my respects. Shall we say you and I shall share a glass once a week?”

“Once a week, Your Grace? Why, that. . . that. . . Yes, Your Grace. I’d be over the moon, and so will my wife. The honor will have her fair to bursting with pride.”

Duncan nodded. “Good. Thank you for the conversation and your honesty.”

Angus bowed his head. “You’re a fine duke, Your Grace. And I hope you’re not offended, but I’m proud to know you.”

Offering the older man a smile, Duncan held out his hand. “And I’m honored to call you friend.”

With that, he headed out into the darkening early evening, his insides a riot of confusion. He was going to have to apologize. Apologizing meant seeing her again. And seeing her again meant being physically close to her.

Now, how the devil was he going to survive that?

CHAPTER 4

Each of the three days since he'd been ambushed by the Duke of Aston in the sea loch had been worse than the last. He'd gone from tenant to tenant in the village and asked about his neighbor, something that had never occurred to him before. Not when he had his factotum to rely upon. The gushing praise for the Sassenach had only increased with each cup of tea or small dram that he had shared in the small parlors. In fact, it seemed the dratted woman had risen so far above the usual dislike of the English that many of the villagers had taken to calling her *our wee English lassie*. Something that said wee English lass had apparently found delightful, thus its continued use in place of "Lady Cavendish."

Old Gregor had apparently been the first to use the appellation when Lady Cavendish had nursed the old man's dog back to health after a cut paw.

Duncan didn't know what to make of it. He'd been rude to her. Rude beyond measure. Was she a scandalous lass? There was no question. Even the villagers admitted she threw wild parties where the whisky and wine flowed, but wasn't she young and pretty and good-hearted? That seemed to be the response of everyone he met. Lady Cavendish had such a kind heart and pretty smile that she could have ridden her horse naked through the village, like Lady Godiva, and his people would have smiled and merely clucked their tongues at the "wee lamb's" eccentricities.

Duncan had suspicions that the wee lamb, or lassie, or whatever his tenants wished to call her, was far more scandalous than any of them could ever imagine. . . But there was one thing he couldn't escape. He was in the wrong. . . No matter how he tried to focus on her behavior, he couldn't ignore his own.

Lady Cavendish's guests were not allowed to shoot. This had slipped from the lips of almost every person with a boy of proper years to go up and beat birds on an estate. The *wee lassie* couldn't bear to see the birds killed for a moment's pleasure. . . And so she'd shared her coin in other ways.

Which meant only one thing. His factotum had lied through his slightly yellowed teeth. Duncan sighed, stared at the tall red door of Lady Cavendish's abode, and tried not to feel like a fractious lad forced to wash behind his ears. He loathed being wrong almost as much as he loathed Sassenachs.

He raised his hand to knock, but before he could, the door swung open and the air whooshed out of his lungs.

Instead of some serious butler, there stood the wee lassie herself. Blond hair tumbled freely over her scarlet-shawl-covered shoulders. A winning smile tilted her lips, and it seemed as if her eyes were dancing. Dancing with amusement. She held the door open wide. "At last, Your Grace. I'm delighted you'd do me the honor of a visit."

He shifted on his feet, unable to force a smile as he searched for words. "Yes. . . Well. . ."

God, she was beautiful. Everything about her. And she was so damned effusively happy. How the devil's sake did a person achieve such delight? Surely a wicked woman wouldn't glow with such glee. Would she? It certainly went against everything he'd been led to believe.

"Are you going to stand on my doorstep all early evening? It is a fine doorstep, if I do say so myself, but the inside is finer. . . And I can give you something decadent beyond words if you can come in."

His chest tightened, and he felt a sudden heat, despite the biting cold outside. Decadent beyond words? Despite himself, his gaze fell to her breasts. Perfect, round, beautiful breasts that pressed at the scooped neck of her cream-colored gown. Her crimson shawl was draped in such a way that the pale, curved tops peeped free, as if teasing any who might look upon them, daring a person to touch.

And he wished to. Oh, how he did. In fact, he longed to trail his lips over their beautiful, pale surfaces.

"Your Grace?" she prompted.

"Harumph. Yes?"

She laughed. "Still *harumphing* I see. Come along then."

As she turned and headed into the hall, his gaze was treated to a fairly stunning view of her sashaying backside draped in the soft folds of her pale frock.

She glanced over her shoulder. "Do hurry, Your Grace. You're letting the cold in."

She spoke to him so easily, as if they'd known each other all their lives. No one spoke to him like that. Not even when he'd been a child. Everyone treated him with deference, respect, and, well, a bit of distance. It made no sense. He'd been unpleasant their first meeting. Why was she being so bloody nice? Perhaps things having to do with the Englishwoman did not need sense.

She led him into a small, surprisingly cozy room. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but not the plush sofa and chairs, crackling fire, and cases and cases of books. The tall window overlooked the loch.

A horrible thought occurred to him as he stared at those clear glass panes.

"I swim in the loch," he stated bluntly.

Her blond brow quirked. "Oh yes. I know."

A strangled noise came from his throat. "You've heard?"

A devilish light sparkled in her eyes. "I've seen."

How many times had he done that? Swam into her part of the loch without thinking? He groaned.

"You're quite the accomplished swimmer."

He gave a tight nod. If she started to compliment his limbs again, he was leaving.

"And you must have the countenance of a merman to survive the cold."

He cleared his throat and glanced at the beautifully tended fire, then the large chandelier overhead. Where should he look? Anywhere but at her. At least she wouldn't have been able to get a good look at him. Would she? No. Just an arm perhaps. "One of your other guests also must be a sea creature then, given his tolerance for the weather."

"The Duke of Aston?" she queried. "You've seen him swimming, too?"

He nodded, not about to add that the damned Englishman had ruined a perfectly fine bit of exercise and righteous indignation in their encounter.

"Oh, Aston is quite the character. The man is mad as a loon, a retired pirate if you must know, but he's quite good fun."

A retired pirate? In his experience, the English were a bunch of braying mules incapable of discussing more than dogs and the weather. Were Lady Cavendish and all her guests so odd? And had she truly called that arrogant tosser, Aston, good fun? What kind of fun did that bastard give her? Duncan clenched his jaw, stunned. That sudden anger he felt? There was only one thing it could be. Jealousy. Deep, irrational jealousy. Why the devil should he feel such a thing for a woman he barely knew?

"Would you like a drink?" she asked.

He shook his head. He was not about to start back down the slippery slope of merriment. No. In her carelessly seductive presence, he needed every ounce of resolve he possessed. "I've come with a specific purpose."

"Ah." She nodded but still headed to the round table bearing a grog tray near the fire. "Do you mind if I imbibe? It's a bit chilly, even with the fire, and

whisky does the most marvelous things to one's insides."

"You drink whisky?" he asked, his voice tinged with far more astonishment than he'd intended. Devil take it, did they *all* drink the stuff?

"Indeed." Her slender fingers wound their way around the throat of the beautifully cut crystal decanter. "From your distillery down the glen, no less."

A glass of whisky might not be unpleasant, he considered, his resolve already wavering. In truth, what harm could the drink of his people do him? It might be the only way he got through this meeting. His mouth certainly was resistant to the words he'd come to utter. "I suppose it would be rude of me to let you drink alone."

That damned cheeky grin of hers returned. "Oh yes," she agreed. "And we can't have you being rude."

Duncan arched a brow. "Are you mocking me?"

She licked her lips, the lower one now glistening in the firelight. She poured two glasses, then gave him a small salute. "I must confess to it."

As she reached out, offering him the other glass, he said flatly, "People don't."

Her fingers brushed his ever so slightly before she asked lightly, "What?"

His mind seemed to blank at just the mere touch of her soft hand against his much larger and rougher one. When was the last time he'd felt the touch of a woman? Besides the other day when her glorious form had been plastered against his? The soft curves of her breasts would no doubt fit the palms of his hands—

"Your Grace," she queried.

What was he saying? He cleared his throat. Oh. Yes. "They don't mock me."

"In truth, I think I was teasing you," she said gently. "I would never be so cruel as to mock you."

Semantics. Surely she understood the power of dukes? "People don't tease me either."

She tsked. "How sad. A good teasing is marvelous medicine."

He imagined that being teased by her on a daily basis would be quite the tonic. But he'd never been one for medicine. No. He did just fine on his own. Truly. "Now, I've come to apologize," he said, desperate to get it over with.

He gripped his glass tightly. If he focused his attention on the cup in hand, well, then she couldn't distract him with her copious charm.

She gave a small nod, mirroring his sudden seriousness. "Have you? Do go on then."

That seriousness of hers didn't quite seem genuine. "Madam, can you take nothing soberly?"

She laughed again and tossed her head, golden curls dancing. "No. Have a sip of whisky, Your Grace. It will do you wonders."

Why was every one of these Sassenachs insisting a drink would do him good? Still, he lifted the glass and, to his own surprise, downed it in one. The burn felt perfect, and he had the foreign desire to ask for another. To feel the burn again. Because that burn countered the desire coursing through his veins.

She unsettled him. That's all there was to this. The sooner he did what he'd come to do, the sooner he could be out of her disturbing presence. Aye. That's what he wanted. Not her. Never her.

She lifted her chin, glancing through her lashes. "Am I that bad?"

"Devil take it, lass," he rasped, barely able to tamp down the fire growing inside him that her every look seemed to flame. "Can you not laugh for one moment?"

She cleared her throat and seemed to fight her smile. "I shall endeavor for a moment's solemnity whilst you apologize."

"Harumph. . ." Duncan couldn't quite stop himself in time. He was being an arse. But she put him on edge, and in a lustful need in a way he couldn't recall.

"I was wrong," he bit out.

"About?" she asked, batting her lashes with exaggerated innocence.

"It wasna your guests who were shooting birds on my land." Each word came out begrudgingly. But he'd done it. It was more infuriating that the recently reappearing brogue, so long gone from his speech, had slipped back into his words at his jumbled senses. Senses that were off-kilter because of her.

"No!" she gasped.

"Stop that," he commanded.

"Stop what?" she asked.

"Mocking me."

She laughed. "*Teasing* you, Your Grace. You're so serious, I can't seem to help myself."

"And how else should a duke be?" he challenged. It struck him as particularly ludicrous that a wee Englishwoman should come up to his lands and proclaim him too serious. Did she not know the plight of the Scottish people? No. Of course she dinna. She might take an interest in the village, but that dinna mean she understood the deep wounds his land had felt in the last century.

She raised her drink and took a sip, and her pink tongue lightly swept over her lower lip as though she didn't wish to miss a drop of the delectable nectar. "Well, I know three dukes rather well, and all three of them put together aren't as serious as you."

"Aston is little better than a court jester, and if he's your example of a duke, you might as well present a dancing monkey," he intoned, then nearly kicked himself. He sounded like an old parson. Truth be told, despite himself, he'd liked the arrogant English duke who'd carried no airs and had been quite blunt about Lady Cavendish's innocence.

Her face softened. "It is acceptable to enjoy yourself every now and again, Your Grace."

"You seem to do nothing but enjoy yourself," he scoffed, then ground his teeth. How did he explain that, once, he'd been free and cavalier? His entire youth in Paris had been one spree after another. It had been his father's merrymaking that had shown him that a spree could sink one's entire life into hell.

Still, each time—each bloody time—he opened his gob, he managed to say something that made him sound like an utter arse. And he wasn't. He wasn't an arse. Or, at least, so he'd believed for some time. Perhaps no one had done the kindness of pointing it out to him until Lady Cavendish and her guests, due to his status in these parts.

She nodded, those gold curls of hers brushing along her pale neck. "I'm quite happy, you know."

He scowled.

And that was it.

Finally, he could do nothing else but let out a deep laugh. A laugh so deep it nearly curled his toes. "I don't know how you do it, but you seem to put me at my wits' end every time I see you."

"It is the job of a woman, Your Grace."

He shook his head, not letting her deny the compliment. "I know many women, and none has affected me thus."

"I thank you then." She gave a small curtsy. "I must admit, I find you to be one of a kind as well."

The air, though chill with the setting in of a Highland winter's eve, turned hot. His hand tightened about his empty glass lest he allow himself to fantasize about caressing her soft cheek, cupping her chin, then tilting her head back to

take his hungry kiss. For he was a man ravenous, having starved himself for ages, standing now before a beauteous feast.

“Am I indeed?” he asked, his voice rough even to his own ears.

“You are,” she said softly, her eyes sparkling in the firelight. “I had my suspicions, from what everyone said, that you were different. But from the moment you ran into me and tumbled me to the ground. . . I knew. There is not another man on this earth like you.”

Tumbled. Ah, that word. If only he had tumbled her in truth. To feel those pale thighs against his hands, to curve his hips against hers. What better paradise could there be?

The voice of reason, usually so loud in his head, whispered against his wild thoughts that he was on dangerous ground. But something about Lady Cavendish made him not give a fig for his previous restraint. He had a distinct feeling that, like a man who’d avoided the bottle for years only to be surprised by a freshly poured cup, he was going to drown in his vice.

As she said, perhaps it was all right to have a good time every now and then. He was the duke, after all. Who, if not he, could be allowed one dalliance? Just one? Couldn’t he? He wouldn’t break everything he had built with just one secret affair.

That winning smile of hers, as if she carried all the hopes and answers to all the pains he’d ever known, pushed him over the brink. He had to have Imogen Cavendish, come ruin or no.

CHAPTER 5

Imogen sensed the abrupt shift in his demeanor. He wanted to kiss her! It was there in his cobalt eyes. Those orbs had changed from determined, at wits' end, as he claimed, to smoldering with desire. My God, she'd never seen such eyes. Eyes so blue that they could cut through to her very soul. For the first time in years, she found that she might just wish fairy tales were true. But she'd learned that young girls often married old men rather than handsome knights, and as much as she might wish it, this duke would more likely prove to be a frog than a prince. But she couldn't stop the sudden fluttering of (yes!) her *heart*!

It was most disconcerting. For she'd learned that pleasure could easily be had without love. The years since her marriage had proved it time and again, and she'd enjoyed every moment without a second thought. But under the duke's hot gaze and rather arrogant air, she felt vulnerability she hadn't felt since. . . well, since before her wedding as a naïve, hopeful young girl. It was the most delicious and frightening of feelings.

She tossed back the last swallow of her whisky, reminding herself that she'd lived boldly for years and there was no reason to stop now. No, not even if an ever so slightly righteous duke had elbowed his way into her life, spouting propriety. It was clear that he longed to be freed from all those imprisoning rules.

"You wish to kiss me," she said, stating it as a fact, determined to not let him slip away without having felt his lips upon hers.

He drew in a stunned breath. "Lady Cavendish," he said gruffly. "Have you no idea how to behave?"

The gruffness, as far as she could tell, only hid his desire for her. In fact, that low note to his voice sent a thrill down her spine. "Indeed, I know exactly how to behave if I wish to be kissed, and I do wish it. Right now."

She hesitated, a shocking bit of doubt clouding her usually sure self. "Unless, of course, you prefer blushing young girls in muslin, staring at the floor, waiting to have their heads tilted up and—"

He laughed. Again. A low, shiver-inducing rumble. "You are absolutely infuriating."

She smiled then. She couldn't help herself. His voice caressed her right down to the hollow of her spine, giving her the most delicious thrill. "I am, aren't I? But I'm also devilish fun."

"You meant it?" he asked.

"What?"

"You desire me to kiss you?"

"Yes."

He placed his glass on the table by the fire before he strode to her. "As simple as that?"

"Must it be complicated?" she returned, her breath catching in her throat.

He paused for a moment, clearly stunned, but then he took her face in his hands, tilted her head, and captured her lips.

At first, the pressing of his lips was far too fierce, as if he was devouring her. It sent her heart thundering, but it was also overwhelming, all consuming. He took her as if he were a man who'd been lost at sea and had suddenly found dry land. Nothing tentative about it, full force, full hunger. The duke kissed her until she could think of nothing but holding on to his shoulders for dear life as her body lit with need.

In all her life, she'd never been kissed like this. As if she were the key to his very survival. Goodness! She never wanted it to end.

He slid one hand into her curls and pulled her closer to him with his other arm. Even as his embrace tightened, pressing her body to his until she could feel the hard sinew of his muscles beneath his clothes, his mouth softened. Now, each kiss was a seduction, his lips moving almost languidly over hers.

The room disappeared, her mind stilled, until all she could think of was kissing him, of his lips stealing her breath and any sense that she was in control of this moment. She relaxed into his hold, allowing his strength to keep her upright. When his tongue slipped between her lips, teasing her, her knees buckled.

Famous! She couldn't catch her breath. She didn't want to. Instead, she held on to his shoulders, pulling herself tighter against him, as if she could be any closer to his form.

He broke the kiss, and Imogen blinked, stunned but able to see his face, his eyes half-closed with desire just before he lowered his head and began to bite her neck oh-so-softly.

She shivered, nearly undone by the pleasure of it. His lips traced over her skin, blazing a trail of desire wherever he went, until once again she couldn't

think. She couldn't think to pause. She couldn't think to speak. Nor could she think to decide if this was a good idea.

No, the only thing she could do was surrender.

He paused, then growled, "Damnation, lass, but you're the most beautiful thing I've ever held."

And with those few words, she melted. The Duke of Blackburn, arrogant, powerful, stubborn man that he was, stole her heart.



Duncan wanted one thing. Just one. Well, no. That was a lie. He wanted to possess Imogen Cavendish, and to do so, he'd do many things. The first? He studied the swells of her breasts. Dare he? If he were in his proper senses, if the wee lass hadn't somehow bewitched him, he'd turn tail and run. But she had bewitched him, and since he'd come this far, there wasn't a devil's chance he was stopping now.

Slowly, he kissed the tops of her breasts, teasing ever so lightly with his teeth and tongue, nearing the edge of her bodice but not quite touching it.

She moaned, a low, soft sound full of longing. On that delicious, gratifying note, she dropped her head back, arching her body into his. A satisfied smile curved his lips. Oh yes. He was going to enjoy this temporary fall from grace, as was she.

Without thinking twice, he whirled her around so that she faced the damask-covered chair before the fire. Instinct, powerful instinct, seemed to take him over.

She gasped at his quickness. "Y-Your Grace?"

"Duncan, lass," he rasped as he trailed his hands down the silk of her bodice, then paused on her hips. "You'll be calling me Duncan."

"Duncan," she sighed.

He grasped the fabric of her skirts and began to tug upward with an agonizing slowness. "I want you, my lady."

"Imogen," she whispered.

He leaned forward, his lips pressed just to the nape of her neck, and breathed, "I want you. . . *Imogen*. Tell me *no*. Save us both the chance of scandal, and tell me *no*."

With every word, he slid her skirts farther up her stockinged thighs, allowing the tips of his fingers to trace up her legs. "I beg of ye, tell me *no*."

For if she told him no, he could stop. He'd never go against a lady's wishes. He held his breath as his hands met her hips. Purposefully, he kept his hands away from the apex of her thighs, the part he longed to stroke with his fingers, with his mouth, with his tongue.

"I can't tell you no, Duncan."

"Why not?" he asked, his lips lingering at her neck.

She let out a sound of delight as his breath played over her skin. "Because I want you, too."

"Then there's only one thing for us to do," he said, and he gripped her hips, ready to kneel and pleasure her.

"Imogen? Will you ever be ready?" a female voice called from the door. "It will be too dark to walk. . . Oh!"

A giggle followed that exclamation.

Duncan cringed. Good God, what had he been about? The desire that had stolen his wits and sense of propriety vanished at the strange woman's voice. He felt frozen, boots stuck to the floor.

"I do beg your pardon," that female voice said. "I shall return. . . later."

"No," he snapped, unable to turn, unable to move, but at least able to realize he needed to make a swift exit. The moment was gone. He no longer would be able to blame passion and the witchery of Lady Cavendish if he stayed.

"I say, Kate, are you coming?" another lady's voice called from the hall. "There's a set of stones I want to investigate. I've heard they are Pictish. . . Famous!" said lady exclaimed upon entering the room. "It's a mating ritual."

Mating ritual? Was this house peopled by lunatics? He'd had his suspicions. Well, if it was, he certainly belonged given his most recent behavior.

"Could you let go of my skirt?"

Duncan blinked, realizing Imogen was speaking to him. "What?"

"Well, what's the holdup?" a deep and articulate male voice demanded. "I've got the wine. Why aren't we going?"

"My skirt," Imogen said with a surprising amount of calmness, still facing the fireplace. "Could you let it go, please?"

"Och, bloody hell." Duncan's hands were still firmly holding the folds of her long silk skirt, leaving her limbs exposed. Thank God he was standing behind her, blocking the worst of it from their audience. He dropped his hands to his sides, allowing the fabric to whoosh to the floor.

"Is this an exhibition?" the same man drawled. "Surely you could find a bedroom."

“Or a closet,” piped the one named Kate. “Imogen is fond of closets.”

Was she, by God? And how the devil did this lady Kate know such a thing? How was such a thing possibly common knowledge? The thought blasted him with another wave of almost uncontrollable jealousy. Just who had she been behaving thusly with in these closets, he wanted to demand.

“Kate,” Imogen said, whipping around. “You’ll shock His Grace.”

“I’ll shock him?” Kate drawled.

“Oh, I say, Imogen, that’s good,” said the other young lady.

He glanced down at Imogen, the wanton charmer with whom he’d just about leaped fully into sin.

Instead of being horrified, she was grinning, cheeks glowing a becoming pink. “We’ve been rather naughty, haven’t we, Your Grace?”

Naughty? That’s what she had to say for them? He drew himself up, squaring his shoulders. It was on the tip of his tongue to decry their horrendous behavior, but he couldn’t. Not with the sudden disappointment in her green eyes.

Her smile dimmed. “Oh dear. You’re about to harumph or scowl again.”

And he did scowl, because she was absolutely correct. He had been about to press his lips tight and bluster on about propriety. Had it not been he who’d pulled her to him? Oh, she’d asked him to kiss her. But he was sure it was because she’d seen the longing in his eyes. Unlike himself, she’d had the courage, or audacity, depending on one’s viewpoint, to act.

So he took her hands. “No, I shan’t harumph. I’ll try to have better manners than that.”

She let out a sigh of relief.

“Manners are highly overrated, especially in such circumstances,” another male voice said from the corner of the room.

Good God, how many guests did she have, and had they all witnessed him about to bend Imogen over?

“Dare I turn around?” Duncan asked, finding much to his surprise that he was starting to smile at the absurdity of the situation.

“At some point you must,” Imogen said softly. “Why not now?”

“Don’t tell me you’re a *now is always best* sort?”

Her delicate eyebrows tilted upward. “Do I not appear such?”

“Excuse me,” Aston called, “but if you’re having a drink, it’s devilish rude not to offer us one.”

Imogen laughed. “Indeed, it is!” She leaned forward and up onto her tiptoes, whispering, “You best face them.”

He nodded. Slowly, shoulders squared, he faced the company. All five of them. Two women, both who appeared to be several months pregnant, beamed at him. Behind the ladies, two dark-haired men, both as big as Herculean statues, appeared to be barely hiding far too much pleasure at his expense. Then there was Aston, who elbowed his way past the two men and clasped the ladies about the shoulders before he called out, "Greetings, Blackburn! I knew you had it in you."

"Aston." The tall, dark-haired man to the right glowered. "Take your paws off my wife, you ill-bred wolf."

"And mine," the slightly shorter but broader man added. "Unless you'd like a hook in place of your hand."

Aston threw up his hands, full of exaggerated apology. "Now, I'd never dream of accosting these ladies."

Imogen laughed. "The ladies would have your balls for breakfast if you tried."

The two women joined in Imogen's laughter.

"Indeed," said the one Duncan was certain was Kate. "Luckily, Aston has a few, a very few, good points. Now, we must be introduced. I'm Kathryn, Duchess of Darkwell." She turned to gaze with absolute adoration at the tallest man behind her. "And this is my husband, the Duke of Darkwell."

"A pleasure," Duncan said.

"I doubt it, old man," returned Darkwell.

"Given what we were about as to interrupt," added the other, broader fellow. "I'm the Duke of Hunt, and this lady determined to find her Pictish stones is my wife, the Duchess Cordelia."

Duncan inclined his head, then gazed at each of them as they stared back at him. For the first time, he felt flummoxed. He rarely went to London, he rarely left Scotland, and he rarely was in the company of multiple dukes. They were his social equals, and any posturing inherent to his upbringing would mean absolutely nothing to these people. So there was only one thing for it. He grabbed the decanter of whisky from the table. "Who shall I pour a glass for first?"

CHAPTER 6

*I*mogen couldn't stop her idiotic grin. It was all too funny. Poor Duncan looked as if he longed to sink into the heather, but he was handling himself quite admirably, considering he was leading a pack of three dukes and two duchesses up into the Highlands during a surpassingly temperate winter's day. It was difficult not to be impressed as he had yet to run for the hills as other men had done when confronted by the dukes of her acquaintance. Perhaps it was because he was a duke, too, but she didn't think that was it. Frankly, she was certain that Duncan would give as good as he got. After several whiskies, he'd agreed to take them all on a nature walk in the morning, and she'd been unsure if he would return. Her lot were quite intimidating.

She never should have doubted him. For he'd shown up on her doorstep in fine condition and with two gillies in tow, bearing baskets of food, drink, and blankets if the weather should continue to be so favorable.

Imogen followed at a companionable distance, enjoying watching Duncan in his element, and truly, he was made for this land. His dark hair was wild in the light wind, his bronzed cheeks had gone ruddy, and his kilt was swaying about his marvelous legs. Oh yes. He was quite the sight. And, thoughtful man, he'd chosen an easy path, winding gently up into the glen for the sake of the ladies and their bellies. He'd even protested that two women with child shouldn't be out and about, but after Cordelia had given him one of her indomitable stares, Duncan had merely nodded and led them off into the sunshine.

"Are the stones far up into the hills?" Cordelia asked brightly as she strode ahead, breeches stretched over her bum. She had, in typical Cordy fashion, insisted that skirts were foolish for such an expedition and produced her own tailored breeches, which also accommodated her growing middle.

Duncan nodded, apparently completely undaunted by her odd apparel, which Imogen thought amusing given his general sense of propriety. But then again, perhaps there was far more to Duncan, Duke of Blackburn, than she'd first surmised. Oh, she'd known he was unique, powerful, handsome, but now she knew there was a passion under his surface that bespoke the depth of oceans.

And from the way he'd taken her into his arms, it was absolutely clear he'd been denying himself for some time.

Duncan pointed to the west and the edge of the sea loch. "If you have such interest in the old ones, Duchess, you must come to my estate. There is a ring of standing stones near the edge of the sea."

Cordelia's eyes lit up, and her husband, the Duke of Hunt, groaned. Cordelia laughed. "Oh yes. Jack only groans because he knows I shall be there all day. And, of course, if I am there all day—"

"I shall be there all day," Hunt cut in, but his eyes were shining with love. He circled his arm about Cordelia's waist and kissed her. Kissed her so long and thoroughly that Duncan looked away.

Kathryn and Ryder linked hands and stared into each other's eyes.

Aston snorted.

And Imogen marched forward, admiring and slightly jealous of her friends. "My goodness! All this fresh air must be conducive to amorous activity."

Aston lifted his hand, which just so happened to clutch a flask. "Or drinking activity."

She laughed. "Can you go nowhere without a dose of spirits, sir?"

"How do you imagine my spirits stay so high? I keep them replenished, madam."

Duncan's lips twitched, dangerously close to a scowl. "Just don't go falling off a cliff, mon. I'd have the devil's own time explaining that. A dead English duke out on a walk with me?"

"Do you have a history of pushing Englishmen off cliffs, Your Grace?" Imogen sallied.

"Och, lass," Duncan said with mock seriousness. "Why do you think I have such marvelous control over myself? Proper behavior has saved many an Englishman from a good launching into the sea."

Imogen laughed before she leaned in and whispered, "You are not always in perfect control."

To her delight, his eyes darkened. With desire. "Well, only the angels can obtain perfection, or so they say."

"Angels?" Aston piped. "Better a devil any day. Who wants to have chubby cheeks and a pert little bum, I ask you?"

Cordy gave a little sigh. "Trust you, Aston, to bring bums into the conversation."

“Someone must bring the party to entertaining conversation,” Aston returned.

The Duke of Darkwell pounded Aston on the back. “We’re merry enough, you old bachelor. And the talk of bums shall be limited to the company of gentlemen.”

“Why?” Kathryn asked. “Don’t we all have one?”

Darkwell grinned, turned to her, and pulled her to him, cupping said bum. “Of course, and yours is delightful. But encouraging that rogue will only lead us into groans of exasperation.”

“Or groans of delight,” Aston drawled. “You quite underestimate my abilities.”

“Dare I ask why the Duke of Aston was invited to your house party?” Duncan asked, his voice rough with suppressed laughter.

Imogen arched a brow innocently. “We needed a sixth at dinner.”

“Oh!” Aston clutched a hand to his heart. “I do say, that’s harsh, Lady Cavendish.”

Cordy elbowed her way into the small grouping. “Now about these stones. . .”

Duncan stared, seeming somewhat dismayed by the behavior of his guests.

Imogen fought a laugh. They were such an odd lot, and Duncan seemed to be at least amused by them, thank goodness.

“Yes, Your Grace,” Duncan urged.

“Call me Cordy. Everyone does. Well, everyone who is my friend. And you seem a fine fellow, Blackburn. I do think we shall get along swimmingly. Any man who takes pride in a circle of standing stones must be made of the best sort of stuff.”

“I take that as the highest compliment, Cordy.” Duncan inclined his head, a kind look softening his face.

Imogen found herself surprised. Kindness hadn’t been one of the immediate attributes she would have thought part of Blackburn’s character. Gruffness? Certainly. But it seemed that he couldn’t keep a kind smile from his lips in the presence of a pregnant lady. For some reason, the thought made her heart swell.

“I knew you would,” Cordelia said simply. “Are the stones large? How big is the circle? I have heard there are varying sizes. Is it as big as the stones at Stonehenge?”

Duncan’s countenance filled with pride and what seemed to be wonder for his ancestors. “It is quite large. Very different from Stonehenge. In fact, I think it

far more dramatic. And. . . I often wonder what it was for.”

A contented sigh escaped Cordelia’s lips. “Ah. Well, some say druid sacrifice, but I have a feeling the stones are older.”

“There certainly is a power to them,” Duncan agreed, gazing out to the sea in the distance. “One wonders if there is some magic key.”

“Magic?” Cordy shook her head, laughing. “Science!”

“So skeptical, Cordy?” Duncan challenged. “You’ll find we Scots take the old ones and the wee folk very seriously. Perhaps, on the right day with the right moon, the stones might reveal their purpose. Perhaps you will find yourself spinning through time, lost to the ancients you find so fascinating.”

Imogen couldn’t stop her heart from beating with intense admiration for the man. Underneath all his proper exterior, Duncan was a romantic. An absolute romantic who secretly believed in magic stones and perhaps even the wee people, too.

“In my experience, I find that everything will eventually be explained by science. . .”

“Your Grace,” Duncan said gently, “who is to say that the wonders of the universe have not all been revealed to us? Surely, there are things beyond our ken. At present at least.”

Cordy snapped her mouth shut, stared at him quite seriously, then nodded. “My goodness. You’re quite intelligent for an aristocrat.”

At that, they all erupted with laughter, except Cordy, who blinked and looked about. “What? What did I say?”

Hunt pressed a kiss to her temple. “Oh, my darling, something that only you would say, and that is one of the reasons I am so desperately in love with you.”

Cordy blushed. “Well, then. I’m quite pleased I said it.”

“As am I, Cordy,” Duncan agreed. “I have little use for aristocrats myself.”

“Oh dear!” Cordy exclaimed, clapping a hand to her forehead. “I meant no insult to Your Grace. You’re a fine host. I often speak my mind too quickly.”

Imogen rushed forward and gave Cordy a hug. “We adore you for it.”

Kathryn nodded and joined the hug. “Indeed. You were a breath of fresh air when you came to claim your husband last year.”

“Indeed, I was quite certain Hunt was in for a bad end before you came along,” Darkwell added.

Aston threw his hands up in the air. “The mutual admiration is such that I must join the embrace.”

“Do so, and you’re a dead man,” Hunt gritted.

Aston chortled. “Better to have lived fully than to—”

Darkwell grabbed his shoulder. “We like you, Aston, but not that much.”

Imogen held her friends tightly, their round bellies making it so her arms were outstretched to the utmost. She smiled, and though her heart was full of joy for them, she found herself longing. She didn’t allow herself to think often of the baby she’d had so long ago and lost. Now, it was impossible not to miss her, and it was impossible not to long for her own belly to be full again. Was it too much to wish to have a babe in her arms and a man to gaze at her with the same sort of admiration that her friends’ husbands stared at them? For one brief moment, she allowed herself to glance at Duncan. Could he? Could they? It was the silliest thought, and yet it felt so right. She’d played the adventurous widow long enough. But would such a man as he ever want such woman as she? He turned, their eyes locking.

And to her utter surprise, he smiled. A slow smile, as if he was amazed at the experience of the day and how much he enjoyed it. Carefully, he mouthed two words. *Thank you.*

In that moment, she knew one thing. He had been just as lonely as she. So, her heart alight with a most shocking hope, she mouthed in return, *You’re welcome, Duncan.*

It was the first secret exchange between them. She prayed it wasn’t the last. It wouldn’t be if she had anything to do with it.

CHAPTER 7

Duncan had never thought of himself as particularly skittish. All his life, he'd climbed the bens and explored every glen on his massive estate in all weather. And Highland weather was nothing to be laughed at in its variance. If that didn't convince him of his own fortitude, then there was the fact he was damned good with a pistol and a rapier, having fought many a duel in France before he'd become Blackburn. If pressed, his fists were marvelous, hammer-like weapons. But these three English lasses, two of them clearly full with bairn, had his heart leaping into his mouth like an old woman's every other moment.

Thank God the day was a mild one.

Still! Had they no sense? Did their husbands not ken their precious cargo? He'd seen the love between the couples. Aye. He'd witnessed the adoring looks that no doubt symbolized the loving actions that had got the lasses with bairn in the first place. So why, the devil take it, was he the only one who seemed to bite his tongue to avoid demanding the wee lasses stop prancing over rocks and streams like surefooted ponies?

In truth, he was a breath away from ordering them all back and safe, but realized he'd sound like an absolute nanny goat.

Cordelia, whom he much admired despite her recklessness, was hopping about the large Pictish, carved stones like a death-defying mountain sheep. The Duchess of Darkwell and Lady Cavendish were smiling at her, chattering away, making notes, and in general moving over the uneven earth as if it were as safe as an Edinburgh ballroom.

"You're clearly not married, are you, Blackburn?" the Duke of Darkwell observed as he leaned against one of the leafless oaks towering above the ancient stones. The arrogant Englishman lit a cheroot. Slightly blue smoke wafted up to the naked, gnarled branches.

Duncan folded his hands behind his back, determined to continue to be pleasant to the pack of English guests. "That, I'm not. But what makes you say it?"

"Oh, the look of terror on your face, old fellow," proclaimed the Duke of Hunt, who strode up to Darkwell, gloved hand out. "Give one over, Darkwell."

“You’ve got your own,” Darkwell replied, arching a black, supercilious brow.

Hunt grabbed at Darkwell’s pockets, patting heavily. “I’ve run out, so give one over.”

“The devil you say,” Darkwell said, batting at Hunt’s hands. “How’d you smoke them all? Turn chimney?”

“They’re the only way to keep my nerves in a reasonable state,” Hunt said, clearly not flummoxed by Darkwell’s resistance. In a quick jab, he grabbed at his fellow duke’s cloak. “Just look at her, leaping about like that.”

Darkwell brushed him off. “Keep your paws off. My man just got this clean this morning. And *my* wife has been following *your* wife into the breach like one of Henry V’s archers. So I bloody well need this”—he twirled his cheroot—“more than you do.”

Duncan stared at the two dukes who gave off a decided air of irritation at each other and barely controlled worry over their women. Up until moments ago, they’d both oozed perfect calm in regards to their wives all morning. He glanced at the cavorting ladies. “You’re concerned about them?”

“We know you’re a Scotsman, Blackburn, but that shouldn’t make you a total dolt,” Hunt drawled.

Ignoring the jibe, since they were his guests and one had to keep up Highland hospitality even if it felt like rubbing salt in a wound, he pointed out, “You don’t seem at all bothered.”

“Never let them see you blink, old man,” Darkwell said, before handing Hunt a cheroot lit from his own.

“They’re your wives,” Duncan said flatly, eyeing the cheroots with longing, but he’d given them up when he’d left France.

“And?” prompted Hunt with a measure of impatience.

“Just tell them to stop,” he said simply, stating what seemed absolutely obvious to him.

Hunt and Darkwell stared at him for a long moment, both of their gazes wide, cheroots midair. Then great guffaws of laughter erupted from them. Hunt grabbed on to Darkwell, laughing so hard he started coughing.

Darkwell threw his head back, chortling. “Oh. That’s good.” He looked at Hunt. “*Just tell them.*”

Hunt snorted, then started coughing again until he was breathless. “I had no idea you were such a fool, Blackburn.”

Duncan bristled. What the devil had he said that warranted such amusement?

Hunt held up a hand. "Take no offense, but. . ."

Darkwell took another look at Hunt, then they looked at their wives, and off they were, bellowing with laughter.

Aston strolled up, bottle in hand. "What have I missed?"

"I've no idea, but I fear they're candidates for Bedlam," Duncan said tightly, not caring for the turn of events at all. Once. . . once, years ago, he'd been like them. Laughing. Making jokes. Smoking, drinking, making merry, as they put it. But he'd let that go. Unlike them, he took being a duke very seriously, and, well, it positively rankled for them to be laughing at him now.

Hunt sucked in a breath. "Old fellow, you've got it wrong. *You're* the candidate."

"I don't see how," he replied, his good humor dimming. It had been a relatively pleasant morning. But of course it couldn't last. They were English, after all.

"What's the Scotsman said now?" Aston asked, grinning. "Another gem, no doubt."

"He said. . ." Darkwell began to laugh, a dry bemused laugh. "He said. . . we should *just tell* our wives what to do."

Aston stared at Duncan, much like the other two inbred sots had done, his lips twitching. "You didn't."

"What, damn it?" he exclaimed finally. "Husbands are supposed to tell their wives what to do. The law and God command it."

"I'd like to see the law and God go toe-to-toe with my wife," Hunt quipped, giving the heavens a quick glance, as if God might be eavesdropping on their conversation. "Oh, wait, I've seen it. They both lost in colossal fashion."

"God?" echoed Duncan, dumbfounded by the sudden odd jump of the conversation.

"You see, Cordelia doesn't worship God, old man." Hunt gave a glance so full of love and admiration in his wife's direction that Duncan nearly squirmed.

"I don't follow," Duncan said.

Hunt's whole damn face transformed into that of a man entirely besotted as he stared at his wife. "She worships rocks," he said reverently.

Duncan blinked with shock, having been raised on hellfire Scottish kirk preachers (not that he'd always followed their dictates). "Surely that's blasphemy."

"Isn't it glorious?" Hunt said, beaming now as he studied Cordelia, who was nose to stone with the Pictish rock.

“You actually *are* mad,” Duncan managed.

Aston laughed, slinging his arm around Duncan’s shoulder. “Aye, mate. They are. Mad in love. Thank God you and I still have our wits about us. It’s a dangerous road they’re on. It’s all staying in, behaving, being a goody-goody. . . Oh, wait, you do that already, don’t you, Blackburn? Why aren’t you married, again?”

He opened his mouth, ready to point out the importance of choosing a proper mate, then stopped himself. What would he say? What *could* he say to these men? He might not understand them, but there was one thing that couldn’t be denied. They loved their wives and their wives loved them. “Because I have yet to find a perfect partner, as they have done,” he said simply.

Darkwell and Hunt grinned.

“And you’ll search till the seas run dry, mate. They’ve got the only two women worth having,” Aston bemoaned, hanging his head.

“We have,” agreed Hunt.

“It’s true,” put in Darkwell. “Though Imogen would make a marvelous duchess if she would settle down.”

“That one?” Aston queried, arching a russet brow. “The stars will fall from the heavens first.”

Duncan ground his teeth. How the devil had Imogen entered their discourse? Frankly, her name on Aston’s lips made him wish to punch the arrogant ponce. Again.

Hunt wagged his brows. “Oh ho! I do think our good duke fancies our merry widow.”

Duncan forced a careless expression to his face. How in God’s name had he looked for Hunt to say such a thing? “She’s quite attractive, of course.”

“You really know how to admire the ladies,” Darkwell said.

“In Scotland,” he said, “it is not necessary to inundate a woman with admiration.”

“No,” Hunt said. “In Scotland, you just brain them and drag them home to your castle, is that it?”

For one intense moment, Duncan very nearly pounded his fist into Hunt’s mouth. But he was above such things now. Perhaps in his youth. Perhaps when he’d been a damned heathen in Paris when Versailles was at its height of glory. But not now. Now, he was in control. “In my experience, the more compliments one gives a woman, the less one means what one says.”

Darkwell snorted. “And yet, the more compliments you give, old boy, the easier the lady acquiesces.”

“I thought you were happily married,” Duncan said, strangely displeased that the man would say such a thing given his marital bliss.

“I am,” Darkwell said lightly. “But that doesn’t mean I don’t remember what occurred in bed sport.”

“What sport?” Kate said, just a few feet away.

Darkwell smiled, then pulled Kate to him. “We are discussing what a dastardly fellow I was before I met you.”

“Oh dear! Have you hours, Blackburn?” Kate asked, batting her dark lashes, all the while lovingly caressing her belly. “That’s how long it would take to hear his sins. Possibly days.”

It was impossible to do anything but acquiesce. “I see, good lady, that you have tamed him just enough to keep him as your pet.”

Hunt and Aston snickered.

“Pet?” Cordelia asked, waddling quite efficiently to the small grouping.

“Yes,” Duncan said. “Kate’s husband.”

“Oh! The domestication of the male species. Not for the faint of heart, if you ask me.” Cordelia leaned up on her toes and planted a kiss on her husband’s cheek. “But well worth it. Now. . . That stone. I think I should do a rubbing. I brought the necessary—”

“I say, are we going to eat any time soon?” Imogen asked, slinging on her arm one of the baskets the servants had brought along. “I’m positively ravenous.”

Easily, Duncan slipped the basket from her grasp. “Whatever the lady requires.”

Darkwell raised his brows knowingly. Duncan glared. Perhaps he was attracted to Imogen. But he was not going down that path. No, he was destined for a nice Scottish lass. A daughter of a laird who had never tread from the proper path and never would. Lady Imogen Cavendish was a lovely lass. But she wasna the lass for him.

CHAPTER 8

Imogen popped the warm scone covered with butter and jam into her mouth and sighed with pleasure. If it was possible, the Duke of Blackburn's cook was better than hers. The food items had been kept delightfully warm by the ingenious hot boxes brought by Blackburn's two servants. She couldn't wait to taste the hot wine steaming in her cup.

The weather was chill, but cold weather had never kept a Scot or Englishman from his outdoor pursuits. Why, she was fairly certain they would have come out even if snow had been falling.

She licked the jam from her fingers, then stopped, leaving her hand in midair and her lips parted.

The Duke of Blackburn sat on the wool blanket directly across from her, his bright gaze trained on her every move. Slowly, she lowered her hand to her lap and snatched up a linen napkin. "Terrible manners. I do beg your pardon."

"You certainly enjoy food, don't you?"

She peered at him. "Is that an insult?"

"Certainly not," he replied, his countenance surprisingly relaxed given the disdain that had darkened his gaze when she'd come upon him with Darkwell, Hunt, and Aston.

"Most women I know barely eat in front of men," he continued, popping a bite of scone into his mouth, managing not to spill a crumb. "Something I know to be an affectation rather than a truism to ladies' appetites."

She studied him, frustrated and fascinated that she couldn't quite draw a clear picture of him. On the surface, he seemed so unapproachable, so stiff, so unkind, but she'd seen beneath that mask he wore and longed to find more.

It was also incredibly annoying that he could eat so fastidiously. Crumbs were scattered about her. Everything he did seemed to be so ordered.

"Do you truly think that about ladies?" she asked.

"Yes." He took a careful swallow of wine, then put the cup down.

She adjusted her skirts over the tartan wool blanket and faced him more squarely. "Would you say that goes for all women's appetites in front of men?"

He shook his head, his dark hair caressing his brow. "I don't follow."

“Well, for instance. . .” She took a deep gulp of wine and nearly swooned when the delicious tastes of cinnamon, orange, and nutmeg burst on her tongue. “Do you think a lady might deny her appetite for reading lest a man think her a bluestocking?”

“Certainly,” he said tersely. “Sad though it may be.”

“Sad?” she piped, stunned and simultaneously delighted, despite his blunt tone.

“I do not care for silly women.” He arched a disdainful brow, as if the very thought of silly women made him slightly ill. “Though I know many men do. Even in France, the women may look like frothy flowers, but they are quite educated. It’s ridiculous to think that women’s intellects are somehow inferior to men’s.”

Hmmm. So he didn’t consider women to be inferior, which was a marvelous thing. In her experience, men generally did look down on their female counterparts, indulging rather than truly listening to them. Still, Blackburn might feel that way about some things, but what about passion? Or was he part of the vast majority who believed women were the bastions of morality? She stared him in the eye. “Then do you approve of women having desires as robust as men’s?”

“Certainly,” he said, putting down his cup and standing. He positively towered over her. His face was so bloody serious as he added, “As long as they are appropriate.”

For one brief moment, she considered looking up his kilt. He was certainly close enough. But even she deemed that horrendously rude. . . Still, his legs were so gloriously firm. “That doesn’t sound particularly French,” she said.

“Well, I’m not French.” He held out his hand. “I’m Scottish. And my days in that country are long done, much like their monarchs and rapscaillon life. Now come, the ground is cold, and we should head back.”

“What was it like?” she asked before she could stop herself.

He lowered his hand and stared down at her, his face almost blank, but not quite. Some emotion threatened just beneath the surface. He hid it with the slight narrowing of his gaze. “What was *what* like?”

“Versailles. Before the fall. Was it as marvelous as they say?” From the further narrowing of his eyes, she hesitated. “Do forgive me if I shouldn’t have asked.”

He glanced up at the sky, his face growing shadowed, and then he looked down at her again. The look in his deep gaze stole her breath away.

“Lady Cavendish, I have never known a more beautiful and scandalous place. Every moment was stunning, every gesture a delight, and it was all a perfect mask hiding the horrors of the people just outside the gilded gates. We sang and drank and danced as the peasants starved. I regret my part in that macabre farce.”

She bit her lip, stunned by his honesty. And touched. So many never mentioned the conditions of the people when the Revolution was discussed. “I admire you for your sentiment.”

He blinked, his only present indication of emotion. “You do?”

She nodded. “It shows what you are.”

A dark brow raised, challenging her. “And that is?”

She smiled up at him. “A good man.”

He was silent, then gave a nod to acknowledge her compliment. “I’ve worked hard to be such.”

From the clarity of his statement, it was easy to surmise he wasn’t going to abandon his efforts any time soon. Those unspoken words hung between them. Did he think she didn’t work to be a good woman or that her behavior was the opposite of his? He did think her scandalous. He’d made that clear before. And it was clear he had no admiration for a touch of scandal. The rather unpleasant thought settled in her heart. “We should be going.”

Duncan glanced about, hands clasped behind his back. “Where is everyone else?”

She laughed despite herself. “A bit of amour alfresco, no doubt.”

“But it’s freezing,” he protested with a surprising amount of shock, considering he’d lived in Versailles.

“When did that ever stop an impassioned pair?” she pointed out.

“Point to you, madam.” He drew in a deep breath, clearly mystified. “You are frank.”

“Would you rather have me lie?” She thought of all the times as a girl that she had pretended that people weren’t entirely proper. For years, she’d acted as if she hadn’t known that ladies and lords were slipping into each other’s bedrooms at the many house parties she’d attended. “For, so often, that’s all those rigid manners are. A lie.”

He stilled. “If you choose to see it that way.”

“I do,” she said tightly, feeling a deep irritation at his righteousness. “Better to speak one’s mind and admit we are creatures who love and feel and long to experience joy. It is what I do.”

“Better to do the right thing,” he contradicted.

A frustrated half groan passed her lips. “Were you raised by a parson?”

His gaze narrowed. “Quite the contrary.”

She stood. Without his help. It had been such a pleasant morning she was truly disappointed it had taken such a turn. There was one thing she couldn’t quite escape. “You don’t think much of me, do you?”

“Lady Cavendish. . .”

“No,” she cut in quickly, tired of his judgment. “You think I’m a damned Mary Magdalene sort of person, determined to drag honest men like you into sin. Well, that’s not the case. I have no desire but to see people happy. And in my experience, righteous parsons do far more damage than people who believe in affection and joy. Now, if you don’t mind, I think I will find my friends, who are also likely doing the wrong and happy thing. Thank you, Your Grace, for our outing.”

“We still have to walk back,” he said, his expression incredulous.

“So we do. And it will be best spent in contemplation of our sins, or lack thereof, don’t you think?”

With that, she turned on her heel and marched off. She’d had enough of parsimonious prigs in her life, thank you very much. And just because this one was very handsome didn’t mean she was going to let him get away with acting a superior bastard. No, by God, she would not.



Two days of self-contemplation had driven one thing home to Duncan.

He was an arse.

They’d been having a perfectly pleasant time, and he’d had to go and moralize. He had no idea what Imogen’s story was. And there was no getting around the fact that he had indeed implied that she was a bad person for behaving outside the bounds of society’s dictates. He had the unpleasant feeling that, in fact, she was a damned better person than most, despite her scandalous behavior.

Didn’t his people love her? Och, aye. And that kind of love wasn’t easily inspired. The biddies who spent hours on their knees in kirk, wearing naught a bauble and preaching Christ’s suffering, did nothing to bring light and help to the people about them.

Then there was Imogen, whose dancing eyes, kind nature, and sense of fun seemed to uplift everyone she met. . . Except himself. Apparently, even she couldn't save him from a good dosing of sanctimonious idiocy. But what was he to do? She was a complete contradiction to what he envisioned a good woman (or man, for that matter) to be.

It wasn't even just *his* interpretation of a good woman. Society proclaimed it so. She was in many ways everything that a woman should *not* be. Independent, outspoken, sensual. . . He was drawn to her for all those things. He couldn't deny it.

Nor could he deny he was a duke with a father who'd nearly ruined the family and its good name with his scandalous ways. My God, if the secret had got out, well, perhaps they would have weathered it, but the Blackburn honor would have borne a mark that would have ensured that generations would have had to practice moral perfection as he now did.

One did not easily survive the open knowledge of his father's horrifying, diseased end.

Even so, perfection was wearing, bleak, and, frankly, Duncan could feel slight cracks in the facade he had so carefully created years ago. That young man who had sung and seduced hungered to escape the prison he had created deep within his soul. He wouldn't free him. He couldn't. But the fact that he had to keep himself on a short leash was no reason to treat Imogen with such rudeness.

And so, he found himself once again at her door, hat in hand.

No one had ever managed to get him to do such a thing before. Not a soul. Nor had he ever been in the wrong so often before. . . Or worse. He cursed to himself. It was becoming a genuine concern that because he had been heir to the dukedom, and then the duke, no one had ever had the courage to point out to him that he was not as entirely right as he assumed.

He knocked the brass knocker against the brightly painted red door, his heart hammering with a shocking amount of trepidation.

Several steps echoed on the other side, and he straightened, anticipation heady within him. Somehow, that Sassenach woman had found a place in his admiration, which would no doubt astound her given his behavior.

Quite simply, he cared about her opinion of him.

The door opened to reveal an old fellow, silver-haired and dressed in simple livery. His wiry brows lifted. "May I help you?"

"The Duke of Blackburn."

The old butler blinked. "He doesn't live here."

Duncan gritted his teeth. "No. No. No. I'm the Duke of Blackburn."

"Beg your pardon, Your Grace."

Well, at least the old fellow wasn't entirely without sense. "I'm here to see Lady Cavendish."

"She isn't in," replied the butler, still standing square in the open door, blocking any sign of admittance.

"She isn't?" Duncan scowled. Was she avoiding him? He couldn't blame her. He'd avoided her in the past. Undeniably, she had good cause to avoid his grumpy, unpleasant person. "When will she back?"

"Oh, she's here, Your Grace."

Once again, when it came to these English people, Duncan decidedly felt at sea. "I don't follow."

And worse and worse, was he truly being kept waiting on the doorstep? He? A duke? Had this particular butler no ideas of precedence? Dukes did not stand waiting. Anywhere. For anyone. But for Imogen, on this particular occasion, he would. Despite the fact the air was blasting down off the North Sea through the oaks and over the loch. . . And right up his kilt.

The butler coughed, his shoulders shaking ever so slightly before he lifted a handkerchief to his red nose. "She's not in the house."

Duncan was very tempted to repeat the phrase drilled into him by his old nurse: *Who's she? The cat's mother?* Who the devil had servants who spoke of their masters in such plain terms?

Lady Imogen did. Of course, she did. For she was an entity unto herself. "If she's not in, how is she here?"

"She's out back playing to the animals."

Playing to the animals. It was tempting to ask what the devil the man meant, but he was giving up. Perhaps he'd fallen into a Jonathan Swift novel and Lilliputians were about to leap out of the bushes. Who knew? But he was not going to struggle any longer. "Out back, you say?"

"Yes." The butler leaned forward and pointed toward the side of the house. "Just around there. Did Your Grace wish to wait inside?"

At last, the man was asking a sensible question, and usually Duncan would have answered with a resounding yes. However, curiosity had a solid hold on him. What and how did one play to animals? The butler couldn't actually mean the four-legged variety, could he? So he shook his head. "I'll find her."

"Very well, Your Grace. Only, I advise you not to startle the animals. It upsets them and Lady Cavendish."

The door shut with a resounding thud that knocked several icicles to the ground and onto his shoulders.

Duncan stared at the red panel then, letting out a sigh, he brushed the ice from his person, turned on his booted heel, and headed for the *back*.

The hunting lodge was large, but nowhere near as large as his castle. It took him no more than a few minutes to follow along the tall, ivy-covered side of the building until he could indeed hear the faint strains of “Greensleeves” on the air.

It wasn’t possible. The butler couldn’t have been literally correct, could he? Duncan strode on, half in mind to come upon a scene from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, fairies and animals dancing as Imogen, Queen Titania-like, played a tune upon a pianoforte.

He shook the fanciful idea away.

As soon as he turned the corner of the building and arrived at the *back* of the lodge, he stopped dead in his tracks. For there was a small building that could have been transported right out of Marie Antoinette’s village at Versailles. As if a German fairy tale had landed right in the Highlands, the two-storied building had all open doors on the first story, rather like a stable. Lantern light poured through the openings to give off a muted gold glow.

Soft hay was strewn over the floor and over the ground near the entrances. From said building, the romantic though slightly inaccurate tones of another medieval tune were being played. He let out a laugh. He couldn’t stop himself. Lady Imogen Cavendish was clearly a woman whom a man would never be able to anticipate.

Reminding himself to *not startle the animals*, he proceeded silently until he stepped onto the fluffed straw and peered in through one of the doors. His jaw dropped. Surprise, given each new astonishing moment in Lady Cavendish’s presence, shouldn’t have been possible. And yet, he was. Who wouldn’t be?

There, in four stalls, were six deer, all standing quite peaceably, their liquid, dark gazes focused on a figure in the corner.

Imogen sat, cloaked in green wool and dark brown fur, at a small pianoforte, her fingerless gloves dancing over the keys, occasionally landing in cracks.

It was the most bizarre and eccentric thing he had seen since he’d clapped eyes on a woman with a live bird inside a gilded cage pinned into her wig at the Paris Opera. Still, he was mesmerized.

There was something ridiculously peaceful about the scene. He waited in the doorway, leaning slightly against the frame, allowing himself to simply look at her in a way he’d been unable to permit himself.

The glow of the lamps gave her golden hair the gilded sparkle of starlight, and a soft smile played at her lips. She was clearly content.

Contentment. It was an emotion he wasn't sure he had ever experienced. It was a miracle he could recognize it in someone else. It didn't seem right that a woman so embedded in scandal could be so calm, so pleased. Not when he struggled every day to do the correct thing and felt so often a riot of emotion within.

Her pale fingers came to a rest on the keys. "Are you going to announce yourself, Your Grace?" she asked without turning.

"You're damned odd, lass," he said without thought, something only she seemed to be able to induce in him.

She turned slightly on her stool. "You've only just deduced such a thing?"

He shook his head. "I knew you were different, but I had no idea how eccentric. You don't happen to have a few bats loose in your belfry, now do you?"

"Oh, several, I imagine."

"If you do, it only seems to add to your charm."

"Ah. Flattery, I see." She nodded. "It does do a lady wonders."

Wasn't it just the other day he'd been discussing compliments and his general rule not to give them? Well, damn and blast. She deserved them. He meant them, too. Imogen Cavendish was devilish charming. There was no getting round it. "I've come with an invitation for you and your party as a sort of amends for my behavior on our outing."

"Indeed?" she asked with a slight coolness.

"Yes. I'd like you all to come to the castle tomorrow evening."

Imogen beamed as if coolness was so foreign to her she couldn't stay thus for long. "I cannot possibly refuse. We are all far too curious about your castle. And I'm glad to hear you wish to be friends."

Friends. Was that what he'd implied? He supposed one might deduce that from his invitation. But all he truly felt was relief that she wasn't treating him like an icy blast of north wind.

"May I come in?" he asked.

"Please." She rose, her full green silk skirts, a slightly darker shade than her cloak, swishing about her legs. "You can meet my charges."

He stepped over the threshold, his boot crunching on the fresh hay. "How have the creatures come to be in your care?"

“I pay the local lads and lasses, as you’d say. Any creature they find in duress comes to me until they are ready to face the world again.”

“That is highly admirable.”

“Thank you.” A soft look of quiet reflection came over her features. “Someone should look after broken things.”

There was a poignant note in her voice. One that begged the question, and yet it would have been the height of rudeness to ask, how she could possibly be acquainted with such things. Fortunately for him, he’d been rude so many times he supposed once more wouldn’t be the end of the world. “How do you know about broken things?”

She lifted a delicate blond brow. “Oh, Your Grace, I must look a bit like a sugar-coated soufflé, but even I have known life’s cruel brush.”

He cleared his throat. “I never said. . .”

She raised a hand. “But you thought.”

It was true. He had assumed she was rather useless, purely ornamental, and not worth a jot of his time. . . before. Before he had discovered that she was a woman of so many facets one might decide she was a diamond of the first water. Not the diamond for him, of course, but for many. “I am an arse,” he said, speaking what he’d been thinking for two days.

“Your Grace!”

“Can I not be frank?” He shrugged. “I’ve behaved quite thoughtlessly with you time and again. For some deplorable reason, you either bring it out in me or simply bring the fact to my attention. Your own frankness is refreshing.”

She glanced down before meeting his gaze, an errant lock of hair teasing her cheek. “It took you nearly two days to find it so.”

Damnation, it was so tempting to reach out and stroke that tendril back from her face, to touch her cheek, but he couldn’t. Or he shouldn’t. “That only proves how much of an arse I am.”

“No,” she said firmly, “you’re not. You’re a good man, trying to do the right thing, and perhaps you are a shade judgmental. But, then again, you’re a duke.”

A laugh rolled from his throat. “Is that why?”

She nodded. “Most dukes have terrible character flaws.”

“You do know no one has ever said such a thing to me. At least not since Nanny.”

“Nanny and I would no doubt have gotten along marvelously.” She held out her hand. “Now, may I show you my menagerie?”

“I should like nothing better.”

“Nothing?” she teased, lowering her hand to her side.

He shook his head with a teasing warning. “Don’t tempt, my lady.”

She gave him a saucy grin. “Ah, but wasn’t it ordained in the Bible that a woman is temptation, Your Grace?”

By God, that grin warmed him in a way that no fire ever could. “Be careful in making such claims.”

“Why should I?” she queried.

“Because”—he leveled a cautionary gaze at her—“the Bible also claims woman is the root of all evil in man.”

She tsked, then turned about, her full skirts brushing the floor. “Do I look like I could be evil?”

“Never,” he replied. There wasn’t a touch of cruelty in Lady Imogen’s heart. He could see that. But she was the kind of woman from whom he should stay far, far away, because for him, she was temptation. Temptation to let all the resolve he’d employed so ruthlessly in the last years slip. For the first time in his life, he felt a moment’s fear. What would happen if he fell? Would he be cast out of paradise for evermore?

“It is getting late,” he observed. “Perhaps you can show me your menagerie another time.”

A resigned sigh escaped her lips. “I thank you for your visit, Your Grace.”

“Thank you for being so gracious and forgiving of my frequently bad manners. And for agreeing to be my guest for an evening.”

“I have already grown accustomed to your unique manners,” she teased. “However, without your charming invitation to your mysterious abode, I would indeed be offended.”

He bowed his head. “Anything to make amends, my dear Sassenach.”

She laughed, then stretched out her hand. “Until tomorrow night.”

He was going to have to take it. That beautiful, slender hand. His strong fingers enveloped hers, and he bent slightly over it, longing to kiss the soft skin. He drank in the faint scent of lavender, savoring the way it danced in the air around her. Then, quickly, he let go of her fingers and headed back the way he had come, determined to find any means possible to resist his one and only temptation.

CHAPTER 9

Imogen tugged her cloak tighter about her violet silk gown, peered out of the carriage, and nearly let her jaw drop. “That can’t be real.”

Kate rubbed her bulging belly and leaned farther back against the velvet seat. “Imogen, it can’t be *that* grand.”

Imogen let out a peep of protest. Kate had no idea. She was tempted to pull down the coach window, thrust out her head, and gawk like a peasant. But it was freezing outside. “It’s. . . it’s. . .”

Kate glanced out the window and gasped. “Worthy of Mary, Queen of Scots.”

“A very silly queen, if you ask my opinion,” Cordelia put in, now craning for her own look.

They had decided to take two coaches. Much to the gentlemen’s dismay, Cordelia and Kate had insisted it be by gender. Imogen had been suspicious, but so far the two had not made any frontal attacks regarding herself and Blackburn.

“I don’t care what you say, Cordy,” Kate replied firmly, “Mary, Queen of Scots, was a tragic queen. So beautiful, so many cavaliers, so many—”

“Idiotic political moves. Bloody hell, what was Elizabeth to do? Yes, dear cousin, please do keep openly plotting my death.” Cordelia twirled her hand. “We are most amused.”

“She was innocent,” Kate protested.

“Ha!” Cordy replied. “As a serpent in a nest.”

“What about Bonnie Prince Charlie, then?” Imogen suggested. “Surely it was worthy of him?”

Cordelia shook her head. “The only Stuart of any worth was Charles II. A magnificent ruler.”

“Who was very, very naughty,” Kate put in.

“Too true.” Cordy grinned. “Which, of course, is why I adore him.”

“Then what Scottish personage should have such a grand castle?” Cordy protested. “This. . . this. . .”

“It’s worthy of Robert the Bruce.” Cordelia sighed, her face smitten. “A warrior king. A brilliant politician. Ruthless. And devoted to his wife.”

Imogen pressed her nose to the icy glass pane and stared out at the castle towering over the loch. It was high on a promontory, the loch at the rear, with a bridge leading out to the castle grounds. Even in moonlight, the magnificence of a bygone era couldn't be denied.

The warm glow of firelight pierced the dark night from hundreds of windows, and Imogen half-expected to hear the ghostly tones of a solitary piper calling the clansmen to war for their bonnie prince.

It was hard to remember that it hadn't been even sixty years since the infamous Battle of Culloden had destroyed Scotland and brought many of its noble lineage to an end. But it was the truth. The Duke of Blackburn's gigantic castle, winged with turrets and towers, seemed untouched, as if it should still be ruled by a great clan chief wielding his claymore.

Imogen shivered at the image of Duncan, kilted, a great cloak about his shoulders and a giant claymore in his hands. He was already a fierce picture. Thus, how could any woman resist such imaginings?

"I say, Imogen," Cordy teased, "do share your lovely fantasy."

She blinked. "What?"

Kate shook her head, blond curls dancing. "You have the most sinful gleam in your eye. I wonder who you could be thinking about."

"Yes," drawled Cordy. "I wonder whom."

Here it was. "No one in particular. Just thinking of warrior Scots."

"Or one particular Scot with thighs like—"

"Stop that!" No one should be noticing Duncan's thighs but her. "You pay no mind to his legs. Focus on your husband's."

"I do. I do," Kate said seriously, but then she let out a sigh. "But when one has a husband with such fine limbs as I do, it makes one a connoisseur. The Duke of Blackburn's legs are among the best, and better still, his are constantly on display!"

Imogen felt her cheeks heating. She'd touched those legs, at first by accident, and then she'd brushed them when he'd taken her in his arms the other day. Frankly, she wished he could doff his kilt and that she could feel all of him. But in private. Away from her friends. For the first time that she could recall, she didn't wish to speak of her exploits, but rather to keep them all to herself.

"My goodness," said Kate quietly. "You really do like him?"

"Blackburn?" Cordy let out a dismayed groan. "Oh dear. He seems rather steely in his propriety."

“Are you saying he’s too good for me?” Imogen demanded, a touch more forcefully than she had intended.

“Quite the contrary,” Cordy said quickly. “I come from a rather scandalous and open-minded background. . . And, well, people of his ilk, they have trouble adjusting to women like us.”

Women like us.

Imogen didn’t have to ask. She knew exactly what Cordy meant. They were all intelligent, wealthy, independent, and ready to let society go to the devil rather than curb their personalities. Clearly, Blackburn was just the opposite.

If anything, he seemed to have locked half himself away in his attempt to conform. Oh, how she wished she could see him break free of the prison he’d built for himself. She could only imagine how magnificent he would be.

The coach rolled to a halt, and a liveried footman opened the door, held out his gloved hand, and escorted her out into the freezing night.

Imogen stepped down, into the icy wind, and looked ahead.

Her breath caught.

There in the massive, arched stone doorway stood her Highland chieftain. Outlined by candlelight, Duncan stood, shoulders squared, his verdant tartan folded perfectly and flung over his black-velvet-covered shoulder. A great emerald winked in the brooch that held his tartan to his jacket and matched the emerald stickpin tucked into his black silk cravat. There was no greater picture of Highland glory than the Duke of Blackburn standing in the ancient doorway of his medieval fortress.

“Are you going to swoon?” whispered Kate.

Imogen jerked, then glanced back at her cousin. She waggled her brows. “Would you catch me?”

“The footman would have to,” Kate teased. “My middle is too big to chance it.”

“I can catch you,” said Cordelia. “I refuse to be daunted by my own growing belly.”

There was a blast of noise.

Imogen had heard the pipes before, in Edinburgh at a dance, but this was different. Entirely. Somehow, by coming here, she felt as if she’d entered an entirely different world. *His* world. The eerie, powerful music filled the air and she knew she was supposed to sweep down the long, dark green rug laid out for their arrival and curtsy for the duke.

So she threw back her head, let the thrill of the music and the moonlight fill her, and promenaded forward. Just as she reached him, she met his shocking-blue eyes and lowered herself until her face was at waist level. "Your Grace."

He offered her his hand. "It is a pleasure to receive you."

As she stood, she could have sworn he actually meant it. Perhaps. Just as perhaps he did more than desire her. Perhaps he liked her, too.

His strong hand fit perfectly around hers as he stepped back.

"I'm not going to curtsy, Duncan," Cordelia said. "I'd topple over. But that was a fine show."

Kate shivered. "My goodness, it's freezing."

Was it? Imogen couldn't feel the cold at all.

Duncan inclined his head. "Then do come in, my dear ladies, and warm yourself by my fire."

He gestured into the foyer, and they swept in together, the door was that wide. In fact, it was clear that the doorway had once had an iron gate.

"Is that a murder hole?" gasped Cordelia.

"It is indeed, Duchess," Duncan said with pride. "And you've a fine eye for medieval architecture."

"Thank you." Cordelia craned her neck, studying the square spot in the ceiling. "I assume it's been used."

Laughing softly, Duncan shook his head. "Och. It has. But not since my great-grandfather's time."

Imogen gaped up at the small square doorway in the ceiling. *Murder hole?* Goodness, what century were they in?

"Do you have a dungeon?" asked Kate as she bustled forward.

"I do, indeed. It is in the caverns below. Should you say ought about the haggis course, you might end up there. I have, of course, already reserved a particularly damp spot for Aston."

A laugh bubbled from Imogen's lips at Duncan's surprising good humor, but her laughter softened as they stepped through and came face-to-face with a great stair. It was unlike any of the homes she'd been in in England. There was no gold or filigree here. No plasterwork swirls. Just stone covered in the most beautiful and vibrant tapestries she'd ever seen. The stairs were so wide, she imagined that three tall men could have lain down. They headed up to a massive archway that had faces carved in it.

"My goodness!" Kate exclaimed. "It's like a cathedral."

“You’ve the right of it,” Duncan agreed. “The faces are saints or old gods. There’s some debate.”

“Perhaps they are one and the same,” observed Cordelia.

“Very possible,” Duncan said. “The priests did try to eradicate the pagan ways by appropriating them.”

Imogen, Kate, and Cordelia followed Duncan up the stairs and into a great hall. A giant Axminster rug of burgundy and gold covered the floor. Despite the fortress-like construction of the castle, this great hall glowed with warmth. Perhaps it was the *two* great fireplaces at either end of the long hall, each big enough for a man to stand in and wide enough to roast a whole venison. What with the crackling logs and the chandelier overhead lit with dozens of candles, the room positively glowed with color.

For a brief moment, Imogen could have sworn her eyes betrayed her. Lights of blue, green, red, and purple shone on the floor and walls, like light spilling through stained glass. But that couldn’t be the case. The high windows were clear glass, revealing the darkness of the night. She looked up and gasped.

“Do you like it?” Duncan asked, his voice astonishingly soft.

“Like it?” she repeated. “*Like* is not near enough the word.”

She couldn’t tear her gaze from the glass sculpted light fixture high overhead, and yet, she sensed that Duncan smiled.

“My mother chose it. She sent for it all the way from Murano.”

“Italy?” she breathed.

“Yes, an island near Venice. The artists specialize in glass.” He leaned in closer, his soft velvet evening jacket gently brushing her arm. “In fact, the daughters of the glassmakers aren’t allowed to marry outside the region, lest the secrets of construction be stolen.”

Over the years, she’d seen remarkable, beautiful, and even painfully gaudy exhibitions of wealth, but this was different, and it didn’t surprise her that the chandelier had been chosen by a woman. The winter days this far north were very short and the nights long and dark. These lights filled the heart and mind with wonder. As she peered up at it, she recognized roses, irises, green stalks, and daffodils. It was a veritable feast for winter’s gloom.

“What has he done to the ladies?” bellowed Aston from the archway. “They’re silent as stone.”

“Clearly mesmerized them,” Hunt drawled.

“No other reason a dour Scotsman could keep them so entranced,” added Darkwell.

The ladies laughed.

Duncan stared at them, clearly annoyed.

Imogen leaned forward and whispered in his ear, "There is a good deal about you to entrance the ladies without the assistance of Herr Mesmer."

"Och, well." Duncan shifted on his booted feet, then coughed. "Now, a drink. Shall we all have a drink?"

Imogen bit back a grin. Why couldn't the man accept a compliment? It was too fun watching him bluster about after she gave him one. She had a suspicious feeling that if she were to compliment his sheep or the organization of his fields, he'd handle such a comment with grace and pride. About himself? The poor man was in a dither.

"A drink is just the thing," Hunt said, shivering.

Aston clapped his hands against his black evening jacket. "Nearly froze my balls off out there."

Duncan arched a dark, foreboding brow. "There are ladies here, Aston."

Heaving a sigh, Aston conceded, "I shall endeavor to elevate my vocabulary."

Duncan gave a nod of approval.

Imogen was amazed. Aston didn't generally give way to anyone, yet he had acquiesced to Duncan's slight censure. What an interesting night this was to be.

Cordelia clapped her hands. "What a beautiful pianoforte."

Duncan tugged the bellpull by the fire. "Thank you. It belongs to my sister. Whom none of you has met."

Aston abruptly turned away, coughing until his shoulders shook.

"Are you all right, mon?" Duncan inquired. "You sound like a cat with a hairball."

Aston glanced back, his face red. "Just need that drink, old boy."

"It will be here any moment." He strode over to the piano. "I don't play, but my sister plays beautifully. Trained with some of the best masters. Had a tutor from Vienna, in fact."

Kate crossed to her husband and circled her hands about his waist. "I don't suppose we might have some dancing. The baby does love to dance."

"Who?" Duncan echoed, his eyes popping wide.

"The little mite inside my wife's belly, Blackburn," Darkwell said, lovingly cupping the full curve of Kate's stomach. "She loves to dance."

"*She*?" Duncan said, his voice now as strained as his eyes.

Kate placed her hand over her husband's. "Ryder insists it is a girl."

Darkwell pulled Kate close and nuzzled her neck. "That's because it is. A perfect little thing, just like you."

"Right then, dancing." Duncan clapped his hands, his discomfort at the intimate discourse ridiculously evident. "I'll have the servants roll back the rug."

Aston rolled his eyes and snorted. "Good grief, man, what are we, a bunch of wilting ponces?"

Hunt groaned. "Aston. . ."

But Aston had already headed over to the corner of the rug, pulling it back from the hardwood. He stopped and looked up. "Well, am I doing this myself or are you delicate flowers going to assist me?"

Darkwell and Hunt grumbled but headed over to the edge of the rug and began rolling it to the other side of the room. As soon as the three Englishmen had finished, they stood arguing about what to do next.

Imogen covered her mouth with her palm, her lips twitching uncontrollably as Duncan gaped.

His astonished face changed, after a moment, to exasperation. "Och, will you not stop muttering like a group of wee old women?"

Hunt dusted his hands. "Well, we can't just leave it here. Shall we put it in the hall? The three of us should be able. . ."

Much like Aston, Duncan merely rolled his eyes, marched over to the now tightly rolled rug, which stretched the length of the room. He bent and, with a decided swish of his kilt, he hauled the rug up onto his shoulder and took it out beyond the stone archway.

"Good God," Darkwell drawled. "Are you one of those Scots who tosses trees about in his spare time?"

Duncan turned back to the room and smoothed down his cravat. "Mayhap."

Imogen applauded. "Most impressive, Your Grace. Now, what were you saying about delicate flowers, Aston?"

Aston was still staring at the rug carefully ensconced in the hall. "That has to weigh a few hundred pounds."

"Easily," Duncan said. "But you three were dithering about it. So. . ."

"Dithering?" repeated Hunt.

"Aye. Dithering."

"How about that dance?" Kate said brightly.

Duncan nodded. "Which lady shall play?"

Imogen, Kate, and Cordelia stared at each other. By all rights, one of them should have been able to play at least well enough to supply a few country

dances. Imogen could play well enough to pacify her menagerie, but she had no delusions about doing so for company. She had horrible problems with tempo.

"I know you've the ability Lady Cavendish," Duncan said.

She frowned. That didn't bode well for a pleasurable evening. If she was at the piano, she couldn't very well dance, and she had every intention of kicking up her heels with her prudish Scot.

"Not that well," she said flatly.

"Oh, fine. Fine," boomed Aston. "I know you're all dying for me to do it and are too modest to ask."

Cordelia snorted.

Duncan's dark brow shot up. "What?"

"I am the best player in the room, old boy." And with that, Aston headed for the piano, plunked himself down on the bench, then ran his fingers over the keys in a grandiose fashion. He then flashed them all a cheeky grin. "What shall we have? A reel?"

And Aston began a sprightly tune, his whole body animated by the music.

Without waiting, Kate grabbed ahold of her husband, and Cordelia followed swiftly with Hunt. The two couples faced each other and began the patterns of the dance.

Aston leaned back. "Where's my drink? Surely I should be kept in drink for my labors."

At that moment two servants in full livery strode in. Without any sign of astonishment at the couples dancing or the disappearance of the rug or the wild playings of an earring-flashing duke, the servants made their way into the room. The first, after one nod from Blackburn, headed for Aston.

The other toward her with Duncan in tow.

She chose a glass of champagne from the extended silver tray, then held the crystal flute filled with bubbling liquid up toward the chandelier, admiring the glass in the warm light. When Duncan paused beside her, she had to bite back a laugh. The man looked as if he was doing everything possible not to harumph or scowl. "Things not going quite as you'd planned?"

"No," he said simply, taking his own glass from the servant.

They were silent as the servant left them alone, watching the merriment. Her own toes were tapping to the music. She loved to dance. But Duncan had yet to ask, and despite her enjoyment of the music, she was getting a sinking sensation.

"You do dance, don't you?" she queried.

"No."

She fought a groan. Good grief, could the man be any more of a curmudgeon? He'd done so well in inviting them for an evening party. But, clearly, he had intended on only drinks and supper, not a direct flight into the Highland Fling. She took a swig of her champagne and eyed her friends.

They were so happy, the two couples, as they bounced up and down, laughing. And it was absolutely endearing to see the two men—all-powerful dukes, both over six feet, broad-shouldered, and formidable—dancing light on their toes, just to make their wives smile.

And it hit her.

She wanted that. Oh, how she did!

Over the last year, she'd been growing more and more discontent with her whirlwind life. Oh, she didn't wish to simply sit in a corner, embroider, pat a husband's hand, and produce children. No, that would never be her. But she did long for love. The kind of love Cordelia and Kathryn had. Until she'd seen both those happy marriages over the last year, she'd never really let herself believe that such a love could truly exist.

In fact, she'd been determined to believe that such things occurred only in the plays and operas she so enjoyed and the delicious novels she devoured weekly. But she couldn't pretend anymore. Love, just like in the stories, was before her very eyes.

There was also the fairly consuming fact that she wanted a child. As Kate and Cordelia's middles expanded, she couldn't help but. . . No. She wouldn't think about it. She refused to be sad this evening. Quickly, she shook the thought of a babe nestled in her arms away before tears could form.

She sneaked a glance at the Duke of Blackburn.

He was a man who would marry. He'd *have* to marry. Perhaps. . . perhaps. . . She barely dared think it. Perhaps he could marry *her*. Imogen took another swallow of champagne. It was a ridiculous thought. Such a man would head to London or Edinburgh and find a girl of eighteen, innocent and completely moldable for his duchess.

Ridiculous, or not, she'd now thought it. The image of the absolutely stunning, powerful man as her lifelong companion gave her a deliciously warm feeling. There was just one thing. Something had turned him against joy. It might have been what happened to all those he'd known in Versailles, but she was sure that wasn't it. It had to be far closer to home to make him so eschew merriment.

If she had to guess, it was the gossip Kate had hinted at regarding Blackburn's father. Any other man of her usual acquaintance would be unable to

stand beside her in silence, holding his untouched champagne, watching the dancers. The men she knew would have already drunk half their bubbly, grabbed her hand, headed for the dance floor, and made several shockingly delightful remarks.

She was certain that somewhere, deep down, that was exactly what the Duke of Blackburn longed to do, even if his rather stony, regal face suggested the opposite.

“Do you like the champagne?” he asked, staring straight ahead.

“It’s particularly fine.”

“Thank you.”

She took a long swallow, finished her glass, and waved it at the servant bearing his tray.

Duncan made the oddest sound. “Another?”

“There can never be too much of a good thing, and since you don’t seem inclined to dance. . .”

He cleared his throat. “Alas, my dancing days are numbered.”

She nodded, took another glass of champagne and tapped her toe to Aston’s reel. Suddenly, the music stopped, and Aston took a long pause, then began a waltz. With a rather grand and romantic sweep of his arms, the infuriating duke filled the air with the most romantic melody.

The two couples seemed to melt with contentment as they came into each other’s arms and began swooping about the room to the lilting sounds.

Imogen let out a sigh. “When was the last time you hosted a party?”

“I host many engagements.”

She fought a groan. “No. Not engagements. A party.”

He looked at her, and then a decided look of discomfort shadowed his features. “Is it that bad?”

For a moment, she considered being proper and lying. Such an action would do him no good, though. “Yes,” she said bluntly.

A dry laugh rolled from his chest, and his eyes, usually so serious, glowed with amusement.

She nearly shivered at the delicious sound. “How I wish you would do that all the time.”

He arched a brow. “Laugh?”

“I cannot tell you how much it changes your countenance. . . Or how it makes me feel.”

“If I could, I would do so again, for clearly it’s made you forgive my poor hosting skills.”

She tilted her head back and eyed him. “I shall have to make it my purpose then to make you laugh.”

His eyes darkened to the color of sapphire. “I think that a very bad idea.”

“Why?” she asked.

“I’ve laughed enough this life,” he said, as if it were some mantra he’d oft repeated to himself.

She sniffed at this ludicrous and melodramatic claim. “One, my good duke, can never laugh too much. It does wonders for the complexion.”

“It might surprise you, but I’m not overly concerned about my skin.”

“Your skin is marvelous,” she observed, delighting in the fact that she was no doubt about to make him squirm again. “Windblown, hearty, and it graces an exceptionally handsome face.”

He drew in a labored breath. “I am trying with every ounce of willpower that I possess not to revert to a *grump*.”

“I admire you for it.” She extended a gloved hand to him, half-breathless with anticipation. “Now, dance with me, and you shall have successfully rejected the last remains of your grump.”

“Ah,” he countered. “But you see, madam, I treasure some of the traits that come from my grumpiness. So in this I cannot help you. I can assist you in more champagne and”—he eyed her extended hand, then held out his arm—“a walk?”

A *walk*? With any other man, she would have known exactly what a walk meant. With Duncan, she had no idea, and so she took his hand, deciding to be ruled by curiosity.

He took two more glasses of champagne.

“You’re behind me, Your Grace.” She eyed one of the flutes. “Better toss one back quickly.”

He smirked. A surprising reaction. “One would never wish to leave a lady feeling on her own.”

She shook her head vehemently. “Of course not. Clearly, you must practice your good manners.”

“Indeed, I must.” With one quick gesture, he brought the flute to his lips and swallowed.

Good grief, he was beautiful. Head tilted back, swallowing the sweet nectar, he looked the perfect devil, even if he insisted on acting the saint.

As soon as he'd taken the last drop, he swept her out into a slightly shadowed side hall, and her breath caught in her throat. If she thought she'd stepped back into medieval times before, now she was truly there. The corridor was stone, adorned with faded tapestries of unicorns and animals from far-off countries. The ceiling overhead was made of dark timber, and paned glass windows lined the wall to the left, looking out to the night.

They walked slowly, her heart hammering. It was such a romantic place, she might have imagined herself in one of her favorite novels.

"Where are we going?" she whispered.

"Just a moment."

It was so strange to walk in silence, but she followed his suit until at last they came to a large turret room with windows on all sides. The walls were so thick that beautiful blue velvet seats had been installed along the stone sills.

"Look out," he said gently.

Holding her glass carefully, she edged to the window seat and did as instructed. A gasp of wonder escaped her lips. The loch was hundreds of feet below, the waves crashing on ancient rocks, and above, the starlit sky kissed the wild bens across the water. It was breathtaking. She could only imagine how many of the Blackburn dukes and duchesses had stood in this very spot overlooking their majestic land.

"You like it?" he asked.

"I've never seen anything more beautiful," she said quite truthfully.

"It's my favorite spot in the castle."

"And you shared it with me?" she asked, full of confusion and hope.

He had the strangest, almost confused look upon his face. "Yes."

She traced her free hand over his arm. "Thank you."

He jerked back from her intimate gesture. "I want us to be friends," he stated.

He was so afraid. Of what, she wasn't entirely sure, but she wished she could free him from it. "As do I."

He gave a nod. "Good."

"But you took me out here alone," she observed.

"Because Aston is pounding that piano like a madman, and I couldn't hear myself think."

Her heart sank just the tiniest bit. Another day, she wouldn't have thought anything of it. Clearly, he wasn't the man for her. Oh, he might desire her. But that was it. Still, she met his gaze and challenged, "Is that the only reason?"

“Lady Cavendish. . .”

“Imogen,” she cut in, refusing to let him reject her intimacy.

He nodded, a soft smile playing at his lips. “Imogen, I. . . You do things to me that I can’t allow.”

She raised her brows playfully. “I do? How terrible of me.”

“Och, lass. I cannot be acting like a lecher in a tavern.”

“I can’t imagine you acting like a lecher in a tavern. But a rake?” She pursed her lips and gave him an exaggerated once-over. “That, I think I can imagine.”

His eyes narrowed, and any warmth that had been there vanished. “I beg your pardon. . . I don’t. . . I don’t feel at all well.”

Her playful demeanor dimmed, replaced by a sudden feeling that she’d hurt him. “Duncan?”

“I. . .” He stepped back. “I. . . We should be getting back. . . Forgive me, but I’m finding this hall to be particularly cold.”

Him? Cold? The man who strode about the Highlands in December in a kilt and swam the sea loch? She didn’t think so, and yet she couldn’t quite bring herself to challenge his blatantly false excuse. She wasn’t one to force a man to keep her company, so she pinned a smile to her lips. “Then let’s go back. We can’t let them have all the fun, in any case.”

He nodded. “And surely one of the other gentlemen will dance with you now.”

Her heart sank. *One of the other gentlemen.* The Duke of Blackburn couldn’t make it much more clear. He had no wish to be close to her. Not now. Most likely not ever. Imogen swallowed, then squared her shoulders. She’d come far too far to let a cantankerous parson of a Scot ruin her good humor. No, she’d be merry. After all, she always was.

CHAPTER 10

One week later

Christmas was in two days' time. Once, it had been his favorite time of year. Duncan scowled at the fireplace, caught himself, then kicked the iron grating. A log shifted, rolled, and sent a spray of glowing embers up the chimney.

He was in a foul mood. A mood black enough to put out the many candle lights dancing about his empty drawing room. He was alone this year. His sister had gone to visit friends in Edinburgh. He'd allowed it. She needed more company than an old grump of a brother. And, well, he'd already seen to every aspect of the fete for the people on his estate tomorrow. Now, there was nothing left to do but stare at the fire, read, and have a glass of spiced wine.

Normally, nothing would have filled him with a greater sense of well-being. Nothing, save that damned woman. It had happened. That night he'd taken her to his favorite place in the castle. The way she'd looked at him. It had struck him to his core. By God, she'd looked at him as if she'd pinned all her hopes on him, and that was *not* what he wanted. He'd briefly contemplated, in the darkest recesses of his fantasy, a mere dalliance. And she? Well, she'd looked like she wanted to link arms with him and join the other dukes and duchesses in their mutual esteem.

He was not about to do something that foolish with an Englishwoman. A scandalous Englishwoman, at that. So, he'd bid them all adieu at the end of the evening and avoided them since. Every moment he'd taken himself out of Imogen Cavendish's presence had been long and shockingly dreary.

In all normal events, he loved the gloom of a Highland winter. He loved the fires, the dark hours, the howling wind and falling snow. Now, for some unfathomable reason, those hours seemed to stretch on in interminable fashion filled with thoughts of golden hair, a mischievous smile, sparkling green eyes, and the warmth that only a kind woman could bestow.

There was a soft knock at the door.

His heartbeat quickened. Had she come to call? He'd avoided the calls of her and her party the last days. It had been the only thing to do. He didn't wish to give her the wrong impression. He wasn't paying court to her. He couldn't.

Every time he'd pretended to be out on estate business, he'd felt the worst sort of blackguard, for the lass had been nothing but kind to him, as had her guests. Well, kind for perverse English dukes.

His butler entered. "A note, Your Grace."

A note.

His foolish and preposterous hope fell. What kind of a man was he in any case to be wishing for such a thing as another visit when he would just turn the lass away? A mean one. A mean, stubborn old grump. That's what she'd say. She'd be right, but he had to make a proper choice for his duchess.

The butler brought the note over to him on a silver tray. The delicate scroll of his name on the cream paper indicated it was from a lady. He took it, then waited until the butler had quietly left. Until he was utterly alone. Again.

As he held the parchment in his fingers, it struck him that he was alone far too often. And almost always on Christmas. It was his one failing as a duke. He never had parties at the castle on Christmas Day. Now, it was true he hosted a party in the village for the locals, but he'd never invited local nobles to his ducal seat to celebrate. The season had just seemed empty of joy since his mother's death a few years ago. Perhaps that was why it had been so easy to let his sister leave a little over a week ago.

He stared down at the note, filled with a strange mix of pleasure that she'd written him and doom because he knew he'd have to throw the thing on the fire. In one quick movement, he broke the wax and snapped it open. There was one line. One damned line. A line he could never ignore.

I never thought you to be a coward, Duncan.

The Sassenach

A coward, was he? Duncan stared down at those delicately inked words and ground his teeth together. He'd tried to do the right thing. He'd stepped away when he'd seen that spark in her eyes. A spark that signified more than desire. But no, she couldn't let well enough alone. She'd challenged him.

To his astonishment, a faint smile played at his lips. After all, he might have been a mean old grump, but he was not a mean old grump who would back away from the gauntlet she'd so clearly flung down.



It had been a bold and somewhat ill-advised thing to do. Imogen realized that now, standing in her parlor, the sound of boot steps pounding down the hall outside. But she'd not been able to countenance his absence. The fool man had had the most wonderful time with her, she was sure of it, and then he'd vanished. Like the wee folk he'd talked of so fondly.

The door handle turned, and she squared her shoulders, but nothing could have prepared her for the door swinging open and the Duke of Blackburn striding straight into the room unannounced.

His eyes the color of rushing, cold water, a blue so intense she could lose herself if she wasn't careful, stared, unflinching. "Were you a man, madam, I would call you out for such an epistle."

She lifted her chin. She refused to be intimidated. "Since I am a woman, can you not think of a more pleasing response?"

A sound of exasperation growled from his throat. "That. *That* is why I have avoided you and your whole damned party."

"My *whole damned party* returned to London five days ago. It is only I you have avoided like the plague."

He hesitated, but the sense of masculine power didn't fade. "Your party is friendly enough, much to my surprise, so I must admit then that it *is* you who I have soundly avoided."

The words stung. She'd known it already, but she hadn't quite believed he'd speak them aloud. "May I ask what I have done to be cast from your so righteous presence?"

He arched a dark brow. "I know you take delight in *teasing* me, madam, but enough is enough."

"Is it?" she asked, her blond brows lifting. "Of some things, there is never enough. Why do you run from pleasure so intently?"

He paused, and the silence stretched to a painful point before he replied, "I do not wish to hurt you."

Once again, her heart softened. How did he know to say just the right thing? "Why would you hurt me?"

"I thought you desired only a dalliance, but the other day. . ."

"You needn't fear, Your Grace. Marriage isn't in my mind." She cut straight to the point, desperate now that he shouldn't see how much she liked him. "I wish only to be your lover. In many ways. Wouldn't it be lovely to have a mutual person to share yourself with? We could be great friends up here in our isolation

and be friends in a way that only a woman and a man of mutual understanding can be.”

Once again, he was silent for a long moment, and then, as if he’d given in to some powerful internal force, he was pulling her roughly toward him. “I want you, of that I am certain, lass.”

“Then that is enough. You know I want you, too.” She wrapped her arms around him. It would have to be enough. His company would be enough to ease the loneliness that had invaded her heart of late. Besides, something deep inside her insisted that she had to have him. If companionship between them was all he would offer, she wouldn’t gainsay it. She’d take him any way she could get him.

For now.



This was not why he had visited her. He kept repeating that to himself. But in his heart he knew it wasn’t true. That letter had finally given him the excuse he had needed to yield to his desires. No more excuses now. She had promised that his company was all she needed. They would be companions. By night and by day.

Every part of him urged him to take her now. But he hadn’t forgotten the last time he had come so close to taking her. He would suffer no interruptions now. Even the idea was painful. “Take me to your room,” he demanded.

Silently, serious now, she took his hand in hers and led him to the hallway, up the carved oak stairs, and down to the east wing. Every step along the woven runner was torture. Every step beat with the promise and anticipation of having her alone, entirely to himself, where he could do whatever he pleased with her delectable body. Again and again.

At long last, she stopped before a door and placed her fingertips on the heavy gold-plated handle. “No going back now.”

In answer, he swept her into his arms, cradling her against his chest. The door opened with a quick turn, and he kicked it shut enthusiastically behind them. He paused only long enough to locate the bed opposite the windows and near the crackling fireplace. Striding to the wide four-poster bed swathed in emerald-green hangings, he took a slow breath, determined to have her but not without pleasing her senseless first.

He put her down onto the downy quilts. “On your knees.”

Her eyes widened at his order, but she complied, adjusting her skirts so that she knelt on the white fabric.

There would be no holding back. Not with her. He was going to take her with every ounce of passion he possessed.

He cupped her chin in his hand, then stole her mouth with a hungry kiss. He trailed his lips over hers, then slipped his tongue into her mouth. She arched toward him, her mouth opening wider, her breathing growing erratic.

This time, he yanked her skirts up to her hips quickly. He needed to feel her. To know she couldn't escape him now. Roughly, he dragged his fingertips over her hips and upper thighs, then, as he thrust his tongue into her mouth, he slipped his fingers between her legs.

She let out a cry of pleasure as he found the most important part of a woman's pleasure. He stroked his fingers into her wet heat, then teased that little nub. He didn't break the kiss, but rather tangled his tongue with hers as he circled his fingers over her clitoris.

Her hands grabbed on to his shoulders, and she rocked her hips toward him. He felt it then. The ripples of pleasure, the tensing of her body, and she moaned into his mouth as she came.

He savored her release, stroking relentlessly until he was sure he'd wrung every bit of pleasure from her he could. Then, in one quick move, he grabbed her hips and flipped her over onto her hands and knees.

He couldn't contain his admiration for the sight before him. God, she was beautiful. The curves of her buttocks fit perfectly against the palms of his hands. He teased his fingers over her hips, then back down to the wet heat waiting for him.

She let out an impatient noise, tilting her hips back, trying to get closer to him.

He would have laughed if he didn't need her so damn much.

No woman had ever stolen his mind or will away like this one had. Gently, torturously, he rubbed the head of his cock along her opening, then over the tight little nub. He stroked again and again, until her hands had seized the blankets in tight fists, and she glanced back over her shoulder, "Please," she begged.

That one word sent him over the edge. He thrust his cock deep inside her, determined to brand her. For, despite everything else, that beast inside him growled *mine* as he sank deeper into her sweet body.

She let out a gasp as he filled her, and then a moan of pure pleasure escaped her lips.

Slowly, as slowly as he could, he withdrew to the very tip, then rammed in deep again. He wanted to claim her, to mark her as his own, and that primal part

of him whispered that if he made this unbearably good for her, she would never desire another man but him. In fact, her whole body would wish only one thing. The touch of his.

His breathing grew ragged, and the hot, perfect feel of her wrapped tightly around him was too much. Increasing the pace, he tilted her hips, finding that magical spot inside her body.

She arched wildly as he stroked that secret place. "Yes, Duncan," she cried. "Yes!"

"Och, lass," he groaned. "You'll be the death of me."

Just as he uttered those words, she rolled her hips against his. Her muscles tightened around him, and she let out a sob, burying her face in the blankets. Those inner muscles of hers tightened around him again and again, a sign of her own coming. It drove him over the edge, and his entire world went wild with his release. His hips thrust quickly against hers as the most intense wave of pleasure he'd ever known washed over him.

The moment it was over, he collapsed, his chest draping over her back.

Her arms wobbled, and she fell across the bed, taking him with her to collapse in a pile of slightly sweaty, warm limbs.

Not wanting to press her harshly into the mattress with his weight, he rolled them onto their sides, his cock still inside her body, allowing every inch of her, from her back to her toes, to rest against his front.

It was a glorious feeling. To his utter terror, it was the most glorious he had ever known.



Imogen stretched, her whole body aching in a delicious way. My goodness, the Duke of Blackburn had behaved almost like a barbarian! She'd loved every moment of it. She opened her eyes only to find Duncan staring at her with a gaze so hot, she nearly burned to a cinder on the spot. Never in all the years since she had embraced a life of fun had she felt so raw, so completely exposed. The sensation was so strange, she found herself pulling the linen up, only to realize she'd fallen asleep in her gown.

"You're wearing far too many layers, lass," he growled softly.

Oh my.

She swallowed. Had she awoken a sleeping, ravenous beast? It certainly seemed so. Her toes curled with anticipation, for if the look on his face said

anything, it was that she was about to be devoured. She couldn't imagine anything more marvelous. "Whatever do you suggest we do?" she teased. She couldn't help herself. The Duke of Blackburn needed to be teased. Everyday. All the time. He was far too serious for his own good.

And yet. She loved that about him. How he met the world with a hard, uncompromising, and honorable stare.

He arched a single black brow, grabbed the folds of her skirts in two hands then yanked.

The material ripped all the way from hem to bodice in one bold tear.

She yelped. "Was that called for?"

"You dinna take me seriously," he said firmly.

"So you ruined my gown?" she protested.

He shrugged his beautiful, broad shoulders. "I'll buy you another."

"That is not the point. You. . ." The soft stroke of his hand up her stockinged leg silenced her. His hand was strong, firm, knowing, as it traveled upward.

He kept stroking toward her inner thigh. "You were saying, lass?"

"Yes. Uh. . . Well. . . Such behavior is hardly. . ."

He pushed her thighs apart and, without warning, lowered his mouth to her folds.

Any protest as to his barbarian actions died a hasty death on her lips. Goodness! For a proper man, he certainly knew the ways of a woman's body. It had to have been all those years in France. She lost the power of witty speech the moment he softly kissed between her thighs.

"You were about to be saying something?" he challenged from between her legs.

She shook her head, her curls rustling against the pillow.

He traced his tongue lightly over her folds, then murmured, "What was that about my behavior?"

Oh, dear heavens! Did he truly expect her to castigate him now?

"Nothing," she said quickly, barely able to speak at all, his tongue was so clever.

He sucked her lightly into his mouth then teased her little nub with his tongue before lifting his head and meeting her gaze with a hot, challenging stare. "I do believe you were taking umbrage with my forcefulness."

"No."

"And if I were to shred another of your gowns?" he asked.

Well, if the result was what he was doing to her now? She laughed, a pained, tortured, absolutely surrendering laugh. “Shred away,” she sighed.

He let out a purely male sound of satisfaction, then bent his head again and commenced flicking his tongue over her. He grabbed her hips, holding her still as he teased her again and again.

The pleasure was almost impossible, for every time she was about to rush over the cliff of pleasure, he slowed his teasing, backing off until she was writhing against him, her hips arching up off the bed.

“Impatient, woman,” he growled against her.

“Let. . . me. . .” she panted.

“I don’t think you’re ready yet,” he said, his voice dripping with desire.

“Duncan!” she begged, winding a hand into his dark hair.

He laughed darkly, then grabbed her hips, tugged her down the bed, then claimed her with his own body. Just in that one hard thrust, she gasped for breath and was thrown up to the stars, her body on fire with burst after burst of delicious release.

As he thrust again and again, his wild blue eyes meeting hers, she knew one absolute thing: The Duke of Blackburn had ruined her for all other men. She was his, and that was all there was to it.

CHAPTER II

Duncan smiled like a loon. There was nothing for it. He was in seventh heaven. Good God, what he'd been missing. And yet, he was fairly certain that no other woman except Imogen would have slaked his desire so passionately. So entirely.

He glanced over at her naked, sleeping form covered by the quilts. Her golden hair spilled over the pillow, a single strand tickling her cheek. Oh, how he was going to enjoy this. Every moment with her would have to be savored. Because this was an indulgence, a temporary lapse, and much like the drunkard who takes a sip after a long absence, he knew he was going to indulge until he could indulge no more and then find the straight and narrow path once again. But at present, he had no wish to think of straight paths.

Imogen's curves were far more absorbing.

The energy pulsing through his body was a complete shock. Preachers always insisted that lechery led to all manner of sins, such as sloth. How had he forgotten how alive a man felt after making love to a woman? Damnation, he couldn't recall *ever* feeling this alive. Certainly not in the last several years of his good behavior.

With a deep inhalation, he jumped off the bed, glorying in the fact he was totally naked. He stretched his arms above his head, strode to his kilt drunkenly strewn over the floor, and hauled it on. Today was going to be a damned good day. One of the best. "Up, lass," he called.

She snuggled into the blankets.

He strode back to her, yanked the covers back, and groaned with delight as he caught sight of her perfect bum. He gave it a playful smack. "Up. It's time to face the world."

"Can't we face the world under the covers?"

"If I climb back in bed, I'm never getting out, and then I shall waste away. I'm famished. You shouldn't wish me to die of starvation, should you?"

Her lips twitched. "To let your perfect form waste away? That would be a sin against all womankind."

“Good.” He cleared his throat, still not quite able to take such a compliment. “Now, let’s go.”

She laughed. “It takes me longer than you to dress.”

He scowled. “But I wish to go now.”

She swung her legs over the side of the bed, then pranced to him and propped her hands on her lush hips. “Is this how you’d like me to go then? Naked as the day I was born?”

His chest and cock tightened. “No man should see you but me,” he said before he could think.

Her face softened. “Well then, I suppose I should put some clothes on.”

“Yes,” he said. “I’ll. . . I’ll arrange for an outing.”

“That sounds like a very good plan.”

He headed for the door, then stopped.

“Imogen,” he said, his voice surprisingly gentle to his own ears. “You look so beautiful. You don’t need to spend much time getting ready.”

“Should I wear breeches then, like Cordelia?” she sallied.

“Yes,” he replied immediately.

“They’re not proper.”

“Do I look like I give a damn about proper today?”

“No,” she whispered. “Not today.”

“Good. I’ll meet you downstairs then.” With that, he headed out the door, ready to make the day the freest day he’d known in a long time.



Imogen rushed down the stairs, feeling strangely exposed, and not just because she was wearing a pair of woolen breeches, a linen shirt, and a thick tweed jacket. Unlike any other affair she’d had, something about Duncan made her feel raw, as if she’d let him see a piece of her heart she’d never let anyone else see. Not only that, she’d entrusted him with a blade to use upon said heart if he so chose. It was fantastically terrifying and liberating, and she felt completely alive.

It had taken her longer than she’d thought to dress, and not because she’d spent some time primping. It had simply just taken her lady’s maid almost half an hour to find her a boy’s outfit that would fit her. Her proportions were simply not that of a young man. Unlike Cordelia, who was tallish, Imogen was not, and she had curves in places where young men were straight. So one pair of breeches had fit over her legs, but she couldn’t even get them over her hips. Another

jacket wouldn't button. And so she was in a pair of riding breeches that had a bit of give and a coat that was too big in the waist and strapped tightly over her bosoms. Still, she'd never had such freedom before. She hadn't been able to abandon her corset, though. Without it, her breasts had no support.

When she entered the foyer, the duke, who was tapping a riding crop against his thigh as he waited, turned toward her and gaped.

She couldn't quite help staring at that crop in his hand, many a naughty story coming to play in her mind. "Are we riding today?"

"Yes."

She swallowed. His lack of clarity only made her certain he meant riding of a variety not limited to horses. "I only have one mare," she said.

"I know, my lady fair." He tsked. "That's a scandal. A woman like you who loves animals."

"Well, I don't ride often, as I was never encouraged."

He chortled.

She blushed. "That was not what I meant."

"I know, but, well. . . I'd be delighted to teach you all about riding, lass."

Before, she would have come back with a quick reply, but not after last night. After last night, she was quite certain he did indeed have a thing or two to teach even her. Goodness, whatever had he been up to before he took his vow of propriety? Had he shagged every naughty mademoiselle in Paris?

A stab of irrational jealousy flooded her.

"Are you quite well, Imogen?"

"Perfectly." She shook the silly thought from her head. "So, whatever are we going to do?"

Frankly, she'd assumed they'd go walking. It's what she always did.

"I am a man of resources. So I shall lead you out, and one of my grooms will meet us."

"It's terribly cold." It was the only excuse she could think of to avoid the horses. She wasn't overly fond of them.

"Are you frightened?"

Famous! How she wished to shout, Yes! But after all the times she'd teased him for his reticent behavior, she wasn't about to start being the maiden in distress. "Certainly not," she said with an exaggerated smile. "Lead on."

The smile that overtook his face in that moment was so brutally handsome she almost couldn't breathe. One man shouldn't be allowed to look so devilishly alluring. She'd have followed him over a cliff in that moment.

He held out his hand.

Her heart skipped a beat. It was a remarkable gesture. So many men just strode on ahead, the lady a step behind. But he wished her to go by his side, her hand in his. With that vulnerable feeling swelling all the more, she slipped her hand into his and strode out into the cold air with him.

The crisp, white sky hung overhead like a Parisian chef's perfect marzipan, and in the distance, the snowcapped bens beckoned like a fairy-dusted, rugged fantasy land.

Her mare, Buttercup, stood patiently, head drooping with absolute trust as the duke neared her. In fact, Buttercup looked like she might melt with utter bliss as the duke stroked behind her ear then under her chin. Blinking softly, long lashes delicately wafting through the cold air, Buttercup had been absolutely seduced.

"She doesn't always like men," Imogen said, astonished.

"Smart mare. Men can be aggressive idiots when it comes to fair creatures. And male or female, horses are knowing creatures. Brute strong or sweet as spring, like this girl here, never be mistaken, horses are from the fairy world. Their spirits ken things that we cannot."

She didn't miss that as he spoke of something that moved him, his words slipped into the deeply appealing tones of the Highlands. If given the choice, she'd love to hear him speak thus forever. It sounded so perfect, so natural. As if he was being finally true to himself.

"Right then," Duncan urged. "Up you get."

"I need a mounting block."

With a look that was positively ruinous, he leaned down and murmured, "Do you not think I have the strength for it, lass?"

She felt her cheeks go hot. *Hot!* She, a woman who had been exceptionally naughty! How was it he made her feel like a girl just fresh from the convent school? She gave his hand a squeeze. "Er. Why, of course you do."

"Give me your leg."

"What. . ." Before she could finish, he'd already bent, cupped her calf and shin in his big hand and was tossing her up onto the saddle.

A thrilling feeling whooshed through her belly. He made her feel as light as air and delicate as a feather. She'd felt many things in her life, but delicate had never quite been one of them.

He stroked Buttercup's neck in slow, soft, sure strokes. "Now take the reins."

She glanced down at the strips of leather, blinking. "Of course." She took them between her fingers, grasping with her palms and thumbs. She wasn't a

complete ninny. She knew how to hold reins properly.

“Now relax.”

“I beg your pardon?”

He smiled. “You’re as tense as a strung bow, Imogen.”

“Surely not.” Was that a defensive note in her voice?

“You see Buttercup’s ears?” he said gently.

She glanced to the horse’s ears, which were pointed back and slightly down.

“Yes, what of them?”

“She senses that you don’t trust her,” he said soothingly. “And that this isna something you enjoy.”

“How?”

“I told you. Horses are of fairy.” Duncan all but cooed at the mare. “They ken things. . .”

“We don’t. Right. Right.”

At that moment, Buttercup tossed her mane, then rested her head on Duncan’s shoulder with a soft blow of her lips.

“You see, she knows that I have only utter admiration for a beautiful, soft lass.”

Imogen sniffed. Had she just been compared to a horse? Though, it was true Buttercup was beautiful. . . for a horse. She shifted on the saddle, her feet still dangling. “Well, how do I relax then?”

“Everyone is different, lass, but you must think only of Buttercup and your surroundings. Not balls, or gowns, or even your menagerie.”

“What about fine dukes in their kilts?”

Duncan laughed. “Fine dukes in their kilts are the only exception. Now, let’s go.”

“But my feet aren’t in the stirrups.”

“Nor should they be, just for now. You learn to relax, and I’ll manage Buttercup.”

She wanted to tell him she was perfectly able. But the truth was, she’d never been good with horses. Not since she eight years old and thrown into a blackberry bush.

Duncan gently took the reins at Buttercup’s mouth, but he didn’t tug on them, merely began to walk, and Buttercup followed as if she’d follow Duncan to the ends of the earth.

Did he have this effect on all female creatures? Cordelia and Kate didn’t count. They were married. But even they had noticed how irresistible Duncan

could be. She fought a sigh. Last night had been remarkable. He'd been so powerful, so masterful. And he'd given her such intense pleasure she didn't know if she'd ever be quite the same.

"You're not paying attention, lass."

She cleared her throat. "My apologies."

"Now, just look around you."

He should have sounded arrogant, what with his orders, but he didn't. He sounded as if he was trying to share something important to him. Most gentlemen she knew cared about horses but only for their morning ride, or the races. Duncan seemed almost akin.

She forced herself to glance away from him and Buttercup's ears. They were walking at a decent pace over the heather toward Duncan's estate. The wind was low, not yet blustering as it could be in late morning, and the sky was ripe with the call of winter birds. In the distance, she could hear the stream that raced over her land and onto Duncan's. It called like a silver song, happy, tempting, and absolutely mischievous, like one of the wee folk the locals and Duncan insisted upon.

"You're smiling, lass, and you're absolutely relaxed."

She blinked. Her lips were curved, and she could feel now that the tension had slipped away from her. She really had no idea how long he'd been leading her. Given the terrain, it had been at least an hour!

"So I am," she admitted.

He gave her an approving nod. "Which is grand, because I hear my ride approaching."

There it was, the approaching cllop of hooves.

Just over the slight hill came the figure of a massive stallion, for that was all it could be, what with its wide chest and height. A young man walked beside the animal, carrying a large basket.

Duncan gave a wave, and the stallion nickered and tossed his mane.

Truly, was Duncan magical himself? For, as far as she could see, despite his seemingly prickly nature, most fell under his spell.

"I'm going to leave you here with Buttercup for a moment. If King gets a whiff of Buttercup here without my hands to guide him. . . It could be quite a wild ride for you." Duncan threw his head back and laughed before he placed a large palm on her thigh. "And you're tense again, lass."

"Yes, well, I did rather have the image of going arse over tea kettle with your stallion in pursuit."

“King is as gentle as a lamb when in my hands. It’s why young James isna riding him but leading him, no doubt feeding him apples and carrots all the way to appease the great beastie.”

“*Great beastie?*” she echoed with an arched brow. “I thought they were fairy.”

“Och, don’t you know, the fairies and the beasties are all in cahoots, with us poor mortals at their pleasure.” Duncan gave her a cheeky grin, then left her alone atop Buttercup as he strode over to King.

What the devil had happened to her grumpy, scowling duke? And he couldn’t possibly believe all this tosh about beasties and fairies and cahoots, could he? No, he was just having her on, what with her being a Sassenach from London.

She watched Duncan as he exchanged a few words with the young man, James, then held her breath as he swung up onto the stallion. She knew it was utterly girlish, but she couldn’t help the absolute thrill that rushed through her as he charged over the heather on his steed, his kilt draped over his thighs. Truly, all he needed was a broad sword.

After riding in large circles at breakneck pace, Duncan brought King around and began a slow walk up to them. It was remarkable the difference. Just moments ago, the stallion had been all flashing sinew and whipping mane. Now, the massive animal who dwarfed Buttercup seemed positively docile with Duncan at his reins.

“Right then, still on for our adventure?”

She swallowed. She supposed this meant she’d be riding on her own now. She wondered if he could tell how foreign it was to her. Nodding, she smiled a tight-lipped smile, doing her best to infuse it with anticipation.

Duncan shook his head. “Lass, you’re as transparent as water.”

Before she could make an indignant reply, he urged King closer, until the stallion was nuzzling Buttercup’s neck with a surprising gentleness. Wordlessly, Duncan slipped the reins from her hands. “You just hold on. Pay attention to your surroundings. Relax.”

And with that, they were off.

Relax indeed! She’d be lucky if she didn’t fall flat on her bum! Still, Duncan had challenged her, and she was never one to back down from a challenge. Imogen took a deep breath and focused on that which was closest, the madman, Duke of Blackburn.



Duncan had no good reason as to why he was taking the English lass way up into the Highlands, farther than he would ever take a walking party, especially on a December day. But he wanted to show her the hidden glen. He refused to think of what might drive him to do such a thing. Surely it was simply that he wished the Sassenach temptress, the woman who had ignited a fire in him unlike any he'd ever known, to know how beautiful his land was. He might not go to the opera every other night, or a soiree, or be dripping in culture, but he had land that was so beautiful one could scarce draw breath for wonder.

Aye. Even he, after more than thirty years, could still feel his heart and soul sing with the power of this land.

Imogen was silent.

What if she wasn't as moved as he? What if, like all other Town women, she was bored by the jagged, heather-covered hills and silver water running down from the snowcapped ben?

He fortified himself, ready for her to make some silly, Sassenach statement, and turned to look at her.

Aside from the fact that her knuckles were white, her entire body radiated amazement. So much so that a tear had slipped down her cheek. "Imogen?" he whispered.

She reached up and dashed the tear away. "Do forgive me, how foolish of me."

"How is it that Scotland can move you, an English lass, to tears?"

She shook her head, her blond hair a riot after the ride. "I don't know. It has seized my heart, you see. The Highlands are my heart."

How lucky those Highlands were. His own Highlands. If only he could have her heart. If only he could allow it.

Her gaze pinned him, her eyes so intense he almost gasped. He'd shown her the most special place on this earth to him, and she had been brought to tears. By God, she was a woman who couldn't ever be dismissed as simply a temptress, or a Sassenach. She was an incredible woman. In that moment, he hated himself. Hated his damned body for desiring her so much. Because he could not keep her. Not a woman with so much sin in her past. No. He could barely trust himself to do the right thing. And look at him. He wasn't even doing the right thing for now. When he chose his duchess, he had to choose a woman who would never tempt him into sin, a woman who would keep on the straight and narrow for his family honor and for his clan.

When the time came, how on earth was he going to let her go? He'd have to. He must. But for now, she was the dearest gift his lonely heart could have ever received.

CHAPTER 12

*I*t had been decades, quite literally *decades*, since he'd had such a merry Christmas Eve. His father had destroyed every Christmas, either by spending it with tarts in Edinburgh, or by getting so drunk he couldn't stand by dinnertime. Those years had been harrowing for Duncan, his sister, and his mother. And the last few years had been marred by his mother's illness. Yes, every Christmas since his mother's death had been small, quiet, reserved. He couldn't bear the idea of celebration.

Until Imogen.

Those two words seemed to sum up so much of his recent life.

Until Imogen.

He caught himself smiling and for once had no desire to stop himself. He didn't care if he didn't look serious. By God, he was happy. The Christmas punch was waiting for the traditional poker to be plunged into it, and Imogen sat at the pianoforte, plunking out slightly inaccurate but beautiful Christmas carols. Every time her fingers hit a crack, his heart squeezed, not with irritation but fondness. Imogen wasn't perfect. She was in many ways the opposite of it. . . And yet, somehow, that very thing made her the most perfect woman he'd ever met.

From her always riotous curls, to her fingers that didn't obey her commands (as she claimed) at the piano, to the way she gobbled cake, Imogen was perfection. Not to mention the way she curved her body against his during the long, cold winter night, sharing her warmth, her passion, and her generous spirit.

Quite simply, he had never in his entire adult life known such joy.

It was damned unfair that he couldn't have it forever.

As he sat, pleasantly close to the crackling fire, the door opened, and Imogen's lady's maid entered, followed by several other servants whom Duncan had seen and spoken to but had never given a great deal of thought.

Three footmen carried trays laden with iced cakes, sandwiches, and other varied fancies and several decanters of wine. The parlor maid and under maid, in their pressed uniforms, bore baskets laden with brightly colored presents and simple boxes.

Duncan stared at the parade, entirely unsure what to make of it. It was far too much food for just Imogen and him, and before he knew what was happening, the odd old butler and one of Imogen's lads who worked with the animals were dragging in a tree.

A tree. Why the devil were they bringing in a tree?

Imogen jumped up from the piano, clapping her hands. "Marvelous! It's time!"

Time for what? he wanted to demand, but even he knew that would result only in merciless teasing from Imogen. So he remained silent, seated, and somewhat paralyzed.

The full skirts of Imogen's emerald gown billowed about her legs as she rushed to the footmen and helped them place the food on a side table.

"Where shall we put the tree, my lady?" the butler asked.

"What do we all think?" Imogen returned, turning to her servants.

Duncan blinked, stunned she'd say such a thing. He wasn't certain if, in the entirety of his life, he'd ever heard an aristocrat ask a servant's opinion.

The young boy, his cheeks bright red from the cold outside, shoved his cap back with a mittened hand. "In the corner, my lady! By the window, so we can see it outside, too!"

Lady Imogen beamed at him as if he was the cleverest person she'd ever met. "What a brilliant suggestion, Malcolm. Does everyone agree?"

The servants nodded, some applauding.

In fact, the general air of the servants was incredibly high. He shifted uncomfortably, not having any idea how he should behave. "What is the tree for?"

Imogen grinned.

"It's to decorate," piped young Malcolm, and then his already red face turned crimson. "Your G-Grace."

Duncan winced. The poor lad looked ready for a slap. Did he indeed seem so grim? "How fascinating. How does one decorate a tree?"

Imogen gave Malcolm an encouraging nod.

"Well," began the lad, "Lady Imogen says we put all sorts on it. Candied fruit and bows and little bells. It's what they do in Germany . . ." He glanced back to Imogen, pulling on his hands. "Is that right?"

"Very! I couldn't have explained it better myself!" Imogen cheered. "And, Malcolm, didn't you find something especially special for the tree?"

Malcolm stared for a moment, then smiled. "I did!"

The boy turned and ran out into the hall.

Duncan lifted a brow. It was the strangest thing, and yet even he couldn't quite escape the feeling of anticipation in the air.

"Wine," Imogen declared. "Everyone needs a glass of wine for the decorating."

To Duncan's astonishment, she went to the table and began pouring deep red wine into simply cut crystal goblets. . . for the servants. As she filled a glass, she passed it back to a waiting set of hands.

"Your mouth is open, Your Grace," she said lightly.

"I do beg your pardon," he replied quickly. He cleared his throat. My God, was he a complete snob? Wasn't he supposed to be the laird of his clan? Here Imogen was, a complete stranger, a Sassenach, treating her servants like friends. So before he could seem any more of an arse, any more than usual, he strode to her and took a glass of wine she'd just poured, reminded himself to smile, and handed it to one of the maids.

The redheaded girl curtsied. "Thank you, Your Grace."

"You're welcome. . ." Then, to his own chagrin, he realized he didn't know her name, even though he'd been in and out of the lodge several times in the last few days. "What is your name?"

"Mairead, Your Grace."

"Mairead." He drew in a deep breath. "Has everyone a glass of wine?"

There was a collective murmur of enjoyment.

Imogen placed a hand on his arm, her approval so rich he could feel it in the comfort of her gentle touch. "Perhaps you can help the maids with the packages?"

"Certainly." He grabbed a glass of wine, took a large swig, savoring the burst of plum, cherries, and spice on his tongue. It was damn fine wine.

Just as he headed over to the baskets filled with various-sized boxes, some with brightly colored ribbon, others plain, young Malcolm came running back in at full speed.

"I've got it!" he exclaimed, skittering to a halt.

The general company of servants turned to Malcolm, their excitement filling the air.

Duncan paused, curious as to what could cause so much excitement.

Imogen crossed slowly to the boy and knelt, her skirts fluffing about her.

There, in Malcolm's mittened hands, was a small bird's nest.

Imogen cupped her delicate hands around the boy's. "Now tell us the story."

Malcolm glanced around at all the adults, then stared at Imogen as if she were an angel straight from heaven. "Well, my lady, I was doing my usual rounds, looking for hurt animals or traps set by people not meant to be on your land, and I came upon this lonely thing. It had fallen from a tree. It was all sad upon the ground. And the old people used to say it was good luck to bring a bird's nest indoors. So I thought. . . I thought. . . I heard about the tree and thought maybe the fairies would bless the house."

Imogen beamed. "They shall, and they'll bless you, Malcolm, for your good heart. Now you pick the place it should go on the tree."

He gulped, then grinned. "Thank you, my lady."

She nodded at the butler, urging him to come close to assist the boy.

Duncan stepped forward without thinking. "May I help Malcolm?"

Imogen looked down at the lad. "What do you say?"

"Why, yes, Your Grace, you're the tallest in the room, after all, and I think the nest should go at the very top."

"Good logic, my lad." Duncan held out his arms. "Let's hoist you up then."

Malcolm crossed to him and stuck his elbows out, holding the nest very carefully.

Duncan took hold of the lad's middle, then lifted him up onto his shoulder.

"Och, Your Grace! It's ever so high up here," Malcolm said wondrously.

"That it is, lad." Duncan couldn't stop his grin. "It's a miracle I can breathe."

Laughter surrounded him, and he felt his heart warm. Was this how Imogen felt all the time? Warm? Included? He swallowed, humbled. How did this come so simply to her and to him only through someone like her forcing his eyes open?

The lad found a perfect place between the bows at the top of the tree and tucked it in.

"Marvelously done," Duncan complimented. "Now, I think you deserve a cake for a job well done."

"A cake?" Imogen exclaimed, winking. "You must have at least two!"

Duncan eased the boy down and sent him off to the table, whereupon Malcolm stared at the cakes as if it was the world's hardest decision to choose between the brightly iced confections. Imogen bustled behind him, bent down, and whispered in his ear. Malcolm gasped, then immediately grabbed a light blue cake decorated with a tiny yellow bird.

Duncan picked up his wine and took a long swallow as the maids began bustling over the plain packages. Before he knew what was happening, the lasses

were bestowing gingerbread in the shapes of little men, marzipan strawberries, and bits of ribbon on the tree.

In all his life, he'd never witnessed such a bustling, cheerful group as Imogen and her servants about the tree. As he stood back, not quite sure where to begin, it occurred to him by the way the crotchety old butler directed so easily and with a playful glint in his eye and how the servants from the village worked seamlessly with the servants from London that this tradition must have happened in every house that Imogen had possessed for every Christmas. It all ran so smoothly. Where had she learned such a thing?

Did nothing daunt her?

"Where did you learn all this?" he asked.

"I spent two years in Munich with my husband. He adored all things from that region, and I must say, I think they celebrate Christmas more beautifully than anywhere else in the world." Imogen observed the ornaments in his hands and took a sip of wine. "I do believe those little men are meant to go on the tree, not your fingers."

He rolled his eyes. "If you insist. But first, what did you say to Malcolm? He lit up like the candle placed in your window."

At the mention of the candle in her window, her face changed with some unknowable emotion. "I told him I had a whole box of many-colored cakes to take home so he needn't worry about picking the right one."

"Well done." He peered down at her, unable to escape that her demeanor had altered ever so slightly when he'd mentioned the candle. In Scotland, placing a candle in the window had a significance. It was a beckoning to the Christ child, letting him and his family know they were welcome on their journey. But he had a compelling feeling that Imogen's reason was different.

"The candle," he said gently. "It's special, is it not?"

She glanced down at her wine before looking up at him, her eyes shining with tears, but she still smiled. "It is. As is this."

Quietly, she crossed to the boxes and found a small pink one. She opened it with one hand, then, with a reverence that stole his breath, she slipped a small knitted baby shoe from the soft paper, studied the tree, then tied it with a small red string to a branch. She stood silently, a slight figure, staring at that small baby's garment.

Duncan's heart dropped. It was impossible to not understand its meaning. His throat tightened. His beautiful, joyful Sassenach had known the worst pain a woman could bear. The loss of a babe.

Despite the public setting, despite the presence of the servants, Duncan came up slowly behind her and laced his arms around her, longing with all his heart to take away her sadness, to hold her, to let her know that he was there. Slowly, he drew her to the window to stand by the candle and to have a moment's privacy with her.

She let out a little sigh and dashed away a tear that slipped down her cheek.

"What was her name?" he asked softly, somehow knowing it was the exact right thing to say.

"Beatrice," Imogen whispered. "Her name was Beatrice."

"*There was a star danced, and under that I was born,*" he said gently.

She tensed for a moment, then relaxed into his embrace. "It is from one of my favorite plays."

"*Much Ado About Nothing,*" he acknowledged. "Beatrice is a wonderful character."

"I always hoped that if I had a child she would laugh and never know tears. Just like Beatrice."

He stopped himself before he could say something like he was sure she would have another child. It struck him that she was still in mourning for Beatrice, that she didn't wish to forget that baby. And saying she'd have another would be like suggesting that one day she would forget. So instead, he pressed his cheek to the soft curls atop her head and murmured, "Beatrice was blessed to have you for her mother. To *still* have you. You, who light a candle for her and hold her in your heart."

Imogen drew in a shaky breath. "You are the most infuriatingly strange man."

"Am I?"

"You wish people to think you have a heart of stone, that you are all logic, and then you go and say something like that."

He shrugged. "I can only say what is clearly true."

She turned in his arms, cheeks wet with tears. "Thank you. Now, let us have more wine and music."

He nodded, realizing the moment between them had passed and that she no longer wished to speak of the daughter who was not here upon this Christmas Eve. So, as the servants continued to laugh and drink and decorate the tree, Imogen slipped back to the piano and began a soft, gentle, and flawless *Silent Night*.

Before he realized he was even doing it, the words to the song were slipping past his lips. Faint at first, then sure, a tribute not to just to the Christ child, but the woman who'd so abruptly turned his world topsy-turvy.

*Silent night, holy night
All is calm, all is bright
Round yon Virgin Mother and Child
Holy infant so tender and mild
Sleep in heavenly peace
Sleep in heavenly peace*

As the song filled the room, its haunting lullaby surrounding them, the parlor grew ever more magical with the glow of candlelight and the silvering of early evening. Here in this remarkable and completely unexpected setting, he felt his heart grow. One day Imogen would be a mother. Somehow, he knew it in his very bones, and her baby would sleep in her arms, and there would be no more beautiful sight in this world than that.

CHAPTER 13

*W*ithout any sort of doubt, Christmas was Imogen's favorite day of the year. From the songs to the wine to the sentiment, it was glorious. But on this particular Christmas Day, she felt a rather odd feeling that she was the present rather than the box she was handing to Duncan.

In truth, she was half-tempted to tie a bow about her head, because frankly the way he was looking at her made her feel like a gift that was absolutely useless but great fun to play with.

It was a disconcerting feeling, especially after the closeness they had shared the night before.

With the joy of a boy, Duncan took the box from her, pulled the green silk ribbon and peered into the box. He let out a laugh. "A sporran?"

She smiled, pleased at his reaction. "You know how I adore your kilts. So I decided on accoutrement so that you never consider trousers."

His lips twitched as he eyed the thing. "It's a bit. . ."

She propped her hands on her hips, daring him to find any sort of fault with her very Scottish gift. "What?"

"Well, ahem. . ." He pursed his lips, then cleared his throat. "The ladies might wonder if I'm making up for something."

She pinned him with a teasing scowl. "What other ladies?"

He coughed. "None. Not a single one."

Giving him a saucy grin, she said carefully, "Think of it like Aston's hat."

A black brow shot up. "What's my sporran got to do with Aston's hat?"

She rolled her eyes. Of course he would be sensitive about being compared to Aston, though the two seemed to actually get along. "His hat is outlandish, but it says he's great fun."

"Are you trying to say my sporran symbolizes my level of fun?"

"Well," she said, filling her voice with appreciation and innuendo, "from my experience, you're worthy of an even bigger one."

A ruddy hue deepened his cheeks. "Imogen," he groaned. "You'll never stop that, will you, lass? Complimenting my person?"

“Should I?” The unfortunate thing that had begun to occur to her was that they genuinely upset him, her effusive compliments about his magnificent body. That he actually found her to be inappropriate. It hadn’t bothered her before. Not until last night, when he had come up to her, taken her into his arms, and then nearly ripped out her heart with his sympathy.

No one had ever noticed her candle in the window or special ornament before. She never spoke of the baby that had lived for two days, filling her arms, then leaving her with the most brutal, empty ache. In unguarded moments, her arms still ached with their emptiness. In truth, she’d had to steel her heart against the ever-rounding, glorious bellies of her friends. Because as delightfully happy as she was for them, sometimes. . . sometimes it physically hurt to look at them and remember what it had been like to bear a child. Not a day went by when she didn’t miss Beatrice. Christmas especially.

Somehow, he had seen that. And by doing so, she cared what he thought. It was the most perverse thing. The kinder he seemed to be, the more her own ne’er-do-well nature cracked. She longed for someone like Duncan to love her. Except. . . Except. . . Well, he wouldn’t. She was a woman who wasn’t afraid to be herself, and men like Duncan, in her experience, no matter how wonderful, would struggle with that.

“You have the oddest expression on your face.”

“Duncan?”

Sensing her abrupt change in mood, he widened his eyes, wary now. He looked like a man at the dock waiting for the judge to send him back to the place from whence he came and then on to execution.

She swallowed. Before she could think too much, before she could be afraid, Imogen burst out, “Marry me, for Christmas.”

Duncan blanched, the sporran slipping from his grip. It landed on the floor with an awkward thump.

She pressed her lips together, the shocking pain in her heart horribly intense. She’d known. Of course she’d known he wouldn’t ever want to marry her. The horrified look on his face confirmed as much. But she’d hoped. God help her, she’d let herself hope. From the first moment she’d seen him, he’d struck some unexpected chord within her. Oh, she loved being his lover, but she couldn’t face the idea any longer of spending day after day growing closer and closer until finally he left her for a fresh young bride. She’d thought she could do it. She’d been wrong.

No, she'd needed to know the absolute truth. Even if it was on Christmas. Even if it had been so entirely impulsive. Better not to waste another moment losing her heart.

He opened then closed his mouth, apparently unable to speak.

"Oh dear," she said lightly, determined not to let her devastation show. "I've quite blindsided you."

"Och, lass," he whispered, his voice rough. "I—I—I'm honored you'd think to ask me."

"But no," she said quickly, nodding. "I'm not duchess material."

To her ever-living shame, he remained silent, making no attempt to deny her statement.

"I see," she breathed. It took all her strength to swallow back the insidious little lump building in her throat and say clearly, "You do have a low opinion of me."

"Indeed, I doona, Imogen," he protested. "I think you are the most wonderful woman of my acquaintance."

"But the most wonderful woman of your acquaintance would make you a poor wife." Every word tripped from her lips without malice, without accusation. She wouldn't turn shrew. What was the point?

"I cannae explain it in a few short words." He drew in a long breath. "But you're not to be my duchess, Imogen. You'd hate it."

She nodded, her heart aching. "Too boring by far, no doubt."

He smiled, a pained, painted grin on his perfectly handsome face. "You've got the right of it. My wife. . . my duchess, she must be beyond reproach. We can never be in the gossips' stews."

She sucked in a breath, trying to get ahold of the tears that were starting to threaten. She'd chosen happiness over propriety a long time ago. How could she have known that that choice would make her anathema to the one man she had ever wanted as a husband? She forced herself to laugh. "You're absolutely right, Duncan. It would be a terrible bother, being so proper all the time. And just think, you poor man, you're going to spend a lifetime utterly bored."

He stilled, a powerful and determined look hardening his face. "Bored but safe. I shan't ever have to worry about hurting my children or my sister."

She hid the pain his words caused. Whether he realized it or not, he was suggesting that if she had a child, her own past would hurt it. But that wasn't true. If anything, all of her experiences would help her child not to choose a

joyless life of duty. But that wasn't what Duncan thought. Duncan thought duty mattered most.

The room swung, and she rushed for the chair, plunking herself down in it. "Well, that's good to hear," she managed brightly. She wasn't about to let him see how she was hurt. How she had let herself be so open to him. "There are far too many bastards out there. I'm glad to hear you don't intend to be one. Or get one either, I suppose."

"My father nearly ruined us," he said. "I can't do that to my family. But I've never been so happy as I am with you, Imogen."

"Of course you are," she said with exaggerated merriment. "Who else could make you happier?"

"Not a soul," he agreed with clear relief. "You understand then?"

"Oh yes," she said softly. "Duncan. I understand."

He strode over to her and knelt before her, taking her hands in his. "I don't want to hurt you."

She just smiled at him, barely responding to his touch. What else could she do? He'd said what he felt, and she didn't wish to ruin the day entirely. The Duke of Blackburn would never be hers, no matter what she said, and she wasn't about to make a fool of herself by pointing out all the reasons why he needed someone like her. If he was determined not to figure it out on his own, she would no longer help him.

He stood and pulled her quickly to her feet. Tilting her head back, he kissed her with a remarkable tenderness.

Imogen savored it. Savored the very feel of his rough yet tender kiss and the taste of rich red wine upon his tongue. The memories would have to last a lifetime. For the fool man thought she would be around for as long as he needed her. She would have been, if she had been more than just his mistress.



Duncan woke up in his cold, extremely large bed, hating the fact that he had had to return to his castle the night before on his own. He just couldn't have the servants knowing about his relationship with Imogen. If she stayed with him, the servants would know without a doubt that they shared a room. He'd taken enough risk sleeping that one evening at her hunting lodge. No, he couldn't behave in such a blatant way. He stretched, swung his legs over the bed, and let

out a sigh of contentment despite the freezing air that was barely warmed by the banked fire.

Usually, he needed several pots of coffee before he felt ready to face the world. But not since Imogen. With Imogen, he felt ready, almost eager, to face the world every day. Yes, she was just the thing to renew his lagging spirits. It had been damned awkward when she'd asked him to marry her. More than awkward. It had been painful. In that moment, he'd felt the floor open up, and he'd almost prayed to be swallowed whole. At first, he'd thought her jesting, but one look at her earnest face had told him otherwise. Luckily, she'd understood his reasons, even if he hadn't gone into detail.

He'd hated having to tell her no. If he'd been born a mere gentleman, he would have taken her into his arms, swung her around the room, and asked when they should have the banns read. But he wasn't a simple country gentleman. He was the Duke of Blackburn, and he would never let himself forget it. He wouldn't ever slip like his father, who had spent his last days in a room down the hall, rotting slowly away as a result of his vices.

The door opened, and a footman entered with coffee. "Good morning, Your Grace."

The fortifying aroma filled the air, and he drew in a deep, appreciative breath. "Good morning, John. Did you have a good Christmas with your family?"

The young brown-haired man nodded. "I did, Your Grace. I even found the schilling in the pudding."

"Did you?" Duncan let out a laugh as he stretched his arms over his head. Once, as a boy, he'd played all the Christmas games, too. "Well done."

John placed the tray down near the fire, gave a small bow, and said, "There's a note, Your Grace."

Duncan rubbed a hand over his face, striding to the coffee. "Thank you, John. Off you go."

As soon as John had exited, Duncan studied the note. He was unaccustomed to epistles at an early hour. A grin pulled at his lips. *Imogen*. Her slightly bold yet wild, feminine hand graced the cream parchment. Without even bothering with the coffee, he broke the wax, curious to see what adventure she might be proposing.

My Dearest Duncan,

Thank you for our few days together. They have been marvelous. I've loved teasing you and knowing you. But, alas, I've realized I really must return to London.

I'm not good for you. . . Or in truth, you are not good for me. You make me wish for things I can't have. It's time for me to return to where I belong, and you to return to the duty you hold above all else.

*May you be happy, dear friend,
Your Sassenach*

Duncan stared at the dark scrawls penned over the notepaper. He had no idea for how long. Several moments at least. Finally, he could hear his own heart pounding, and he realized he was holding his breath. She was gone. She'd left him. Alone. The light that had begun to warm his life was now extinguished, and for one long, horrible moment, his throat closed. His eyes stung. He started for the door. He had to stop her. To make her see reason. But just as he placed his fingers on the door handle, he paused.

What the devil was she on about? *Not good for her?* What the devil could she possibly mean by that? He was a good man, a man above reproach. Until he had come into her company, he had behaved in an exemplary fashion. He had succumbed to his desire for her, but she. . . *She!*

Duncan ground his teeth together, balled the note in his fist, and strode to the fire. He never should have allowed himself the luxury of her company. She'd distracted him. Teased him, as she said. She'd teased him right into forgetting the man he was supposed to be. By God, was that how his father started? A pleasant affair here and there, and then. . .

Duncan swallowed. He wouldn't think about it. He couldn't. If he allowed himself to vividly recall the horrific, sobbing shell of a man that had been his father at the end, he wouldn't be able to face the day.

Staring into the flames, he cast the note against the crackling logs. The paper curled, blackening then licking red. The ashes scattered amidst the burnt wood. She was right. They'd had a lovely few days. It was never meant to be more. Just because she'd asked him to marry her, didn't mean they ever could. That had to be why she left. She'd wanted to be a duchess. Like her friends. And he'd turned her down.

An affair had not been enough for her, despite what she'd so fervently claimed.

A woman like Imogen couldn't possibly want a grump of a man for any other reason, but his title, and, well, the lass, kind though she was, had cast her chances to be a duchess to the wind a long time ago when she'd chosen a life of scandal. He supposed it was rather bold of her to try for him.

It wasn't hurt that hammered away at his heart. It wasn't. It was relief.

So he'd thank God she was gone. What he needed now was a swim. Only the cold of the loch would ease the sudden unrest in his chest. Yes. The sooner he returned to routine the better. And he could go back to being the duke he'd always meant to be.

CHAPTER 14

Two months later

“*You*’re scowling, brother.”

Duncan’s scowl deepened, then he snapped his paper down and glared at his sister. “The devil I am.”

Lady Rosalind lifted a black brow and gave him what he could only call *the eye*. That particular look ran in the women in his family. His grandmother and mother had had it. It was an ability to look at one with such disbelief it verged on disgust. If it had taken physical form, it would have been a slap upside the head.

“Fine,” he acceded. “I am, but I’m prone to scowling. It’s my nature.”

“It isna, Duncan.” She tsked. “It’s not your nature at all. It’s only a role you’ve taken on since becoming the high-and-mighty Duke of Blackburn. I remember what you were like when you were a boy and when you’d come home from your romps in Paris.”

He snapped his newspaper open, lifting it so he didn’t have to see any more of *the eye*. “I disagree with your childhood recollections. I have always been a serious sort.”

Ros snorted. “Then who was it who flew my knickers from the flagpole?”

“I was fourteen!” he protested, tempted to lower his newspaper, but realizing he’d then have to get into a full row.

“And extremely mischievous,” she said, undaunted by said newspaper. “But something has you all in a twist. If I’d known you were in such a mood, I never would have returned home.”

Finally, realizing she wasn’t likely to let it drop and driven by curiosity about her last comment, he peered over the edge of his paper. “Why did you come back from London again?”

He adored his little sister, but her sudden presence was not particularly welcome since he was in an awful humor. Had been for two months now. And she wouldn’t let such a thing pass without much comment. Perhaps he could urge her to hie off. After all, Scotland before spring was not a particularly joyous place in any case.

“None of your business,” she said mysteriously.

"If not mine, then whose?" he pointed out. She'd always told him everything, as far as he was aware.

Ros shrugged her shoulders and looked to the windows overlooking the loch. "I had a mood for the Highlands is all."

"Seems to me you've come running home with your tail between your legs." He narrowed his eyes, a suspicion taking root. "Those damned Londoners give you a hard time?"

He folded his paper, feeling the urge to protect his baby sister, an emotion he could easily come to terms with. Thumping a few Englishmen would be just the thing. "If so, I'll go down there and thrash every last one of them to. . ."

"No!" she exclaimed, her cheeks blazing red. "It wasna the people. They were fine enough. I just hated the dirt and smell and noise and. . . and. . ."

"You know what they say about ladies who doth protest too much, don't you, Ros?"

There it was. *The eye* again.

"Duncan, I'm going to wring your neck."

"Just try, lass," he drawled. "Would you like some tea? I hear tea does wonders for ladies in distress."

"Ha! Tea!" she exclaimed. "Something stronger, I should think."

Duncan eyed his sister, wondering what the blazes had happened since she'd left just before Christmas, and *something* had most certainly happened. He just couldn't quite put his finger on it. She even looked different. It had been two months since he'd seen her. She'd gone to Edinburgh, then on to London with friends. Just yesterday, she'd shown up, boxes in tow, and *the eye* flashing almost every other minute. Truthfully, he was concerned she was on the verge of atypical feminine palpitations.

"Since when did you start drinking things that are stronger?" he demanded. "You mean ratafia or a bit of port, don't you? That's it."

"I bleeding well mean brandy."

Bleeding? "And when did you start using language that would make the vicar blush, lass? You are a young lady."

She snorted. "I'm an adult and I'm not that *young*."

"You're an unmarried woman" he pointed out. His sister might not be in the nursery, in fact by many standards she was an old maid at twenty seven, but she was still little more than a babe in his heart. She always would be.

"Which doesn't change the fact that I am a mature lady who is very much on the shelf," she sallied.

“Och!” He let out an exasperated noise. “You’re going to drive me mad. Have your damn drink.”

“Would you like one?”

He stared at the decanter across the room. “No,” he said firmly, despite the fact that he wanted one very much, but he was going to be a good example, even if it killed him.

“You’re going to let me drink alone?” she asked as she crossed to the grog tray.

“I am, you drunkard,” he teased. “I’ll not join a inexperienced lass in a tippie. You shan’t be able to say I did naught on your road to ruin.”

“Duncan,” she said clearly, almost pointedly. “I am not on the road to ruin.”

“Glad I am to hear it.” He hesitated. Rosalind had always been a strong lass, prone to impulsive action and wild emotion. His opposite in every way, really. But he couldn’t help a sudden and rather alarming concern.

“You look like you’re choking on something,” she observed.

“You’re all right, aren’t you, lass?” He cleared his throat, unsure how to even ask such a delicate question. He wanted her to know that, no matter her predicament, she could always trust him. “You know you can tell me anything?”

Her face softened, and for a moment it seemed that instead of the willful gleam in her eye, there was the faintest hint of tears. Before the moment could stretch any further, she shook her head, dark curls flouncing, and poured the brandy. “You needn’t worry. But I’m leaving in two days’ time for Italy.”

“Italy?” he echoed.

“Yes, home of the emperors.”

“I know about the blasted emperors.” He shifted on his seat, wishing that relationships with little sisters weren’t so complicated. It would have been marvelous if she could have just stayed a little girl forever. This young woman business was going to be the death of him.

“You only just returned,” he said. “And I’ve been rattling around this place like a marble in a box.” He pursed his lips, very much liking the idea of not being so entirely alone. “We could keep each other company.”

She laughed. “Och, Duncan. I don’t know what you’ve been doing these last months, but your company seems as amiable as a wet blanket.”

He frowned. “What do you mean by that?”

“Only that you don’t seem terribly happy. Or. . . you seem even less happy than usual.”

He squared his shoulders, resentful she should be so intuitive. "I'm perfectly content."

Rosalind raised her glass. "Liar."

He opened his mouth to give her a good setdown and realized such a thing would be entirely out of order. "I had an annoying encounter with one of our neighbors."

She leaned forward, eager for a bit of gossip. "Who?"

"Lady Cavendish," he mumbled. "If you must know."

Ros wagged her brows and took a sip of brandy. "But I met her in London!"

"What?" he yelped, dignity abandoning him.

"She was utterly charming."

"She is not." She was. He knew it. Hell, how could anyone not know it? Imogen was charm personified.

"Well, everyone else seemed to think so." Rosalind smirked, and her gaze narrowed with cunning. "She was most curious about you."

"Indeed?" he asked, infusing his voice with as much disinterest as he possibly could.

She took a sip of her drink. "Mmm. She asked if I'd seen you recently. I told her no."

"And?" he asked, doing his damndest to be subtle.

"And what?" She blinked innocently.

"How did Lady Cavendish seem?"

Ros' lips turned in a mischievous grin. "In very good health."

"No! Not like that."

She raised her brows. "Not like what?"

He cleared his throat and pretended to study his paper. "Did she seem disappointed that you didn't know about me?"

"Not at all. She said you were no doubt very busy categorizing and ordering all the sheep in the Highlands to stay in line."

"She said *what*?"

Rosalind shook her head woefully. "Lady Cavendish was quite sweet about it, but she had you perfectly."

"I do not keep sheep in line," he roared.

Rosalind gave him another dose of *the eye*.

"Stop that," he ordered.

She didn't. In fact, she seemed to intensify her gaze.

“Fine,” he snapped. “Fine. I do like to keep things in their proper place. But she had no right to say such a thing.”

“I don’t know.” Rosalind sloshed the brandy around the tumbler like an experienced drinker. “She seemed rather fond of you.”

Duncan eyed his sister’s action but couldn’t quite think of anything but Imogen. “She did?”

Rosalind nodded.

Duncan glanced back down at his paper, not seeing a damned word. “And was she in the company of any gentlemen?”

“Oh, several.”

He nearly shot out of his seat with the rage that burst through him, but he forced himself to appear calm. “The Duke of Darkwell, perhaps?”

Rosalind shook her head.

“The Duke of Hunt and his wife?” Duncan asked hopefully.

Ros pursed her lips and shook her head again.

“The Duke of Aston, surely?”

Rosalind’s eyes widened, and she brought her hand quickly to her mouth as she coughed. “W-who?”

“An arrogant ponce, but never mind him then.”

Rosalind nodded enthusiastically. “Forgotten.”

“So. . .” Duncan began with forced ease. “These men. . .”

“They swarm about her like bees to honey,” she supplied merrily.

“Damnation,” he growled.

Rosalind laughed. “Oh dear. Brother. You *like* her.”

“I do not.” Duncan balled up his paper and threw it to the floor. “Damned irritating woman.”

“Lady Cavendish?”

“She has a few good points. Very pleasant looking. She has a lovely smile, I grant you. And green eyes that fill one with the warmest feeling. And she always has a teasing word. . .”

Rosalind let out a sigh. “Why are you here?”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Why aren’t you in London trying to win her back?”

Duncan stared at his sister for a long moment, contemplating blustering his way through her observation, but he let out a rough breath, shoulders sagging. “She was never mine. She cannae be mine.”

“Why?”

Duncan stared at his sister for a long moment. "You ken why, Ros."

"Because of Papa?"

Duncan gave a tight nod.

"How you could ever think you'd be like him is beyond me." Rosalind's face softened with sympathy. "Your heart is a kind one, Duncan. Nothing like Papa's. There isn't a selfish bone in your body. In fact, you're always self-sacrificing to the point of your own unhappiness."

Duncan gave his head an adamant shake. "She can't be mine."

"Why not?" Ros challenged. "She's beautiful, titled, moneyed."

"She's a scandal." He had to remember it. Otherwise, he'd be on his knee in a moment, begging her to be his duchess.

"She's the toast of London!" Rosalind exclaimed. "Almost everyone adores her, and those who don't aren't worth knowing."

He shook his head. "I can't. I just can't."

Rosalind paused, then said, "So you're fine with some other man having her for his own?"

Duncan narrowed his eyes. "I think we should change the subject."

"I think you should head to London immediately."

"Thank you for your thoughts." With that, he grabbed his newspaper from the floor and smoothed it open. He commenced pretending to read with as much conviction as he could muster whilst absolutely fixated on the image of Imogen dancing and teasing other men. Was his sister right? Could he dare? He'd been so determined that he couldn't have her, and yet Rosalind was virtually pushing him out of the castle. As he sat there thinking of Imogen, one word began repeating over and over in his head, some ancient clansman seeming to come to the fore of his consciousness. That word grew and grew in power and intensity, until finally he threw the newspaper on the floor again and stormed out of the room.

Mine.

He could no longer ignore it. He'd tried for eight weeks, and every damn moment had been beyond miserable. His body had known it from the first time he'd seen her. Only his mind had argued, but now, there could be no argument. From the intense jealousy and desire to go to London and murder every man who attempted to touch even Imogen Cavendish's little finger, there was only one thing to surmise.

He strode into his room, yanked open his closet, and started pulling out traveling clothes. A slow smile pulled at his lips. A vision of Imogen, naked

before him, came to his mind. *Mine*, that voice within growled again.

There was nothing for it. He'd always been a man who claimed what belonged to him.

A knock on the door stopped his hurried movements. "Enter," he called.

The young footman, John, slipped into the room. "Your sister said you required my assistance."

Duncan stared. "Did she, by God?"

John nodded, his face a trifle pale.

"Start packing, John," Duncan said, thrusting a handful of shirts at the young man. "We're going to London."

CHAPTER 15

*I*mogen pushed at her hair. The full curls were falling a bit, even though her maid had spent a good hour fluffing and pinning. No doubt, it was the weight of the diamond hummingbird pinned at the back. She drew in a deep breath, her corset straining her ribs, and searched the room for a footman. She was in desperate need of more champagne. The night was venturing into the tediously boring. Well, most nights were these days.

It wasn't the ball. Her Grace, Hyacinth Eversleigh, Dowager Duchess of Hunt, threw the most marvelous events in London. This one was particularly lavish, as her daughter Gemma was being launched into society. Hyacinth was a particular friend, both of them being rather free-minded when it came to ladies and amorous adventures. Even so, she had avoided the dowager duchess and her vivacious daughter.

In fact, she'd been avoiding people she knew lest they inevitably ask what was bothering her. It seemed she hadn't been quite her usual self in two months. Parties had always been her forte. Apparently, no longer, though she did keep trying.

Despite the raucous laughter, bright music, and ladies in multicolored gowns and men in bejeweled jackets and tight breeches spinning about her, her heart felt rather bleak. She bustled across the crowded room, turning this way then that to avoid the full skirts of the ladies, occasionally pressing a hand to her tilting hair.

A footman was just in reach.

He passed with a silver tray, and she grabbed a glass of champagne dotted with bright red raspberries, something quite luxurious given the time of year. She cradled the drink in her hand and started for the ladies' closet. She'd danced until her toes screamed with indignation, determined to seem as happy as ever. Some of her partners had been veritable bulls, pawing her feet with their hooves. And what with her vigorous tilting and turning, well, it was time for a moment alone and a bit of help in fixing her coiffure. Patting was not going to do it.

She turned down a hall, stepping into shadows lit only by interspersed candelabra. She weaved slightly. Hmmm. How many glasses of champagne had

she had? She wasn't entirely certain. She'd picked glasses up and placed them down several times over the evening as she had been asked to dance.

The ladies' retiring room was somewhere about.

She looked right then left. Had she gone the wrong way?

A hand grabbed hers. A male, bold hand. It dragged her into a darker alcove. Clearly, the place had been designed for lovers. Given Hyacinth's penchant for affairs, Imogen wasn't at all surprised that there would be such a nook so close to the ball. There were probably several in the house given that the garden was closed during the cold, dreary month of February.

She sighed. She wasn't frightened. She knew how to handle men who'd had a drop too many. But it was truly an annoyance.

That hand pulled her close. "My dear girl, I've missed you so."

She frowned. She knew that voice. The rich, seductive tones were unmistakable, and as she looked up, she met golden eyes glimmering in the shadows.

"Roth?" she demanded.

He smiled a wicked aquiline smile as he lifted her hand to his lips and kissed oh-so-lightly. Then he proceeded to give a dramatic bow. "At your service, dear lady."

She arched a brow. "No service required, Your Grace. Hie off."

He gave a pout that should have been petulant and feminine. It wasn't. Roth was a master with women, and everything about him suggested masculinity and pleasure. "Is that how you greet me?"

"A tight slap might be best."

He laughed. "You do seem a trifle high-strung. How long has it been since you've had your. . . *release*?"

She snapped her shoulders back and pinned him with an outraged stare. "That is none of your business."

"We're old friends, are we not?"

They were. It was true. When she'd first come to London, she'd met Roth. Powerful, seductive, and terribly happy to be her guide into sin, Roth had been a true friend as well as another member of the Dukes' Club. He'd never once tried to seduce her, claiming her heart was too good for him. He liked to tease her, but he'd never even so much as tried to steal a kiss. To her relief. She appreciated the man's friendship far too much, even though she hadn't seen him in almost two years. The duke was always traveling.

"What are you doing in London?" she asked.

“I’m a man after a horse.”

“I beg your pardon?”

Roth sighed with a surprising degree of annoyance. “A certain lady has given me the slip.”

“How unfortunate for you,” she drawled.

“Unfortunate for the lady, rather. I think I’ve gotten her into quite a sticky situation.”

“You didn’t!” Roth was an exceptionally responsible fellow when it came to the getting of bastards as far as she knew, and she was astonished he would put a young lady at risk. In general, the scandalous men of her acquaintance limited themselves to widows and wives. Virgins were *tres passé*.

He rolled his golden eyes. “Retract your enthusiastic shock. I’ve not got her with child.”

“Well, that’s something.”

“Hardly.” Roth’s eyes darkened with displeasure. “If she was with child, she’d have to. . .”

Imogen’s mouth dropped open. Roth couldn’t have been about to say what she thought. “Have to. . .” she prompted.

“Never you mind.” He seemed to force a merry air. “It’s my sticky wicket, not yours.”

She had to be mistaken. There was no way Roth was taken with some young thing. He was as elusive as the wind. Ladies had been trying for nearly two decades to get him to the altar. Some suspected there would be no heir, others said he had plenty of time. He and Aston got on tremendously and largely for the reason that they both shuddered at the mere mention of the altar.

She slipped her hand out of his hold. “We best head back before the gossips see us.”

“Since when have you given a damn for the gossips?”

She frowned. “Much to my annoyance, only recently.”

“Aha. Someone accused you of being less than proper.”

She rolled her eyes. “I haven’t been simply less than proper in years.”

“All right, someone called you a bawd flashing her wares about.” Roth assessed her bosom without lust. “You do have lovely wares.”

She snorted. “Thank you. But yes.”

“And this person’s opinion matters?”

Pressing her lips together, she looked away. She wasn’t entirely sure how to answer that question without giving Roth far too much information for her own

comfort. He was a merciless teaser.

“That would be a yes.” Roth’s brows rose. “By God, it’s a man.”

She huffed out an annoyed breath.

Roth’s brows rose even higher. “A man you *like*.”

“Roth, you really are the limit sometimes.”

“Oh, dear girl,” he said gently. “A man you thought to keep? If he has such thoughts about you, be glad you cast him back. Sounds a right cold fish.”

How did Roth sum up her position so easily? Duncan, whether she wished to admit it or not, in the end was indeed a cold fish. Those brief glimpses of emotion were battened down so fiercely, she doubted that he would ever be able to release them. No, he would continue to pack them up inside, experiencing an occasional moment of what freedom might be. But Duncan didn’t want to be free. That had been a hard lesson. He preferred his frigid rules to their warm love.

Slowly, she allowed herself to smile. “Thank you, Roth. You always manage to put things into perspective.”

“Glad to hear it. If it hadn’t worked, I was going to have to find the fellow and give him a damn good beating.”

“That would be rather difficult.”

“Why? Big fellow?” Roth tsked. “Your lack of faith saddens me.”

She laughed. She couldn’t help it. He was such a dear friend. “He’s a duke.”

“He is not,” Roth protested.

“He is.”

Roth started to laugh. “Oh, Imogen, I think by now that you of all people know that dukes rarely come up to snuff in regards to love.”

“But Darkwell and. . . and Hunt—”

“Are exceptions to the absolute, bloody rule. Just wait and see.” He took her champagne from her and sipped. “For instance, when Aston and I marry, it will be for duty and breeding. Love, my dear girl, is not something they teach us in the nursery.”

“I thought you loved your parents. You always speak of them so fondly. . .”

“And I lost them.” He placed the glass on the small sill along the wall. “Lost them, dear girl. I don’t intend to go through all that again. No. Love is all well and good in the plays and books and poems. But they can keep it. I’ll take women, wine and song, a full nursery, and a lady who knows when to retire.”

She rankled at that. It also suggested that Roth saw her, much like Duncan, as a woman of wine and song, not a lady for breeding.

As much as she longed for another baby, a baby who was in her arms for more than two terrifyingly short days, being a woman strictly for breeding didn't sound at all appealing. She felt rather sorry for the girl Roth had compromised, if this was his plan for her.

"I hope you don't truly mean what you say," she said gently.

He gave her an unrepentant grin. "Oh, I never say what I mean. Except when regarding marriage. You know I think it best to be honest all around in regards to that."

"Then be honest. I would make a bad duchess, wouldn't I?"

"Darling, you would be a duchess for the ages," he proclaimed emphatically. "But if the man wants to be a respectable duke? You will be bored to tears, and he will always be trying to change you. Is that what you wish?"

Tears stung her eyes. That was almost exactly what Duncan had said.

"Dear girl, never change. Please don't. This world needs Lady Imogen Cavendish, not another duchess beaten down by her husband's ideas of propriety."

She nodded. "You're right of course."

"Lovers, dearest." He gave her cheek a reassuring pat. "Lovers are the best, and if you must marry, find a fellow who loves his books and his drink and worshipping you just the way you are. He must find his achievement in you, not vice versa."

"Are you telling me to marry down?"

Roth blinked innocently.

That was exactly what he was saying.

"If you marry down, darling, he will never try to own you," he explained. "A more powerful man will always be intimidated by your own personal panache. That's how they breed them on this cold little island."

She wanted to protest about Darkwell and Hunt again and even point out how badly he was painting himself, but if she thought of all the great marriages that had taken place in her adulthood, Roth was right. Women with ideas were quickly chastised by their husbands and put back in line. Only a handful of women were political or worthy of any particular note.

She had no wish to fade into nothingness. But Duncan. . . He'd seemed. . . Well, he'd seemed like a potential tyrant, but he'd also seemed so full of kindness, as if he could never hurt anyone he loved.

He didn't love her. Never had. And it was imperative she recall that. So he'd hurt her, because he'd had to to protect those he *did* love.

“Now, let’s go cause a scandal,” Roth proposed, reaching for her hand.

“No. You go ahead. I need to do something.”

Roth narrowed his eyes. “Not cry.”

She smacked his shoulder. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

“Well, with you ladies, one can never tell when the waterworks will happen, even with someone as merry as you.”

She shook her head. Roth would always be incorrigible. “No waterworks. I have no intention of ruining my face just now.”

He bent and kissed her cheek. “Good. For it’s as lovely as your heart.”

She sighed and rolled her eyes, determined not to let him see that his words touched her. “Go. Go! I shall join you in a bit for said scandal.”

With that, he gave her a grand bow worthy of a queen, then strode down into the dim hall.

She stared after him, wishing that things were different. Roth was a strange soul. Unreachable. A mask always on his features. And yet, he was able to lift her spirits in a way that no one had in months. She was grateful he’d taken her under his wing all those years ago. She hoped that he was wrong about himself. Even he deserved love.

Imogen shrugged, then started off in search of the ladies’ retiring room again, trying not to let her spirits droop as badly as her hair.

One day she’d find a man who loved her just the way she was. And she had to believe that day was sooner rather than later, because the one thing she absolutely refused to do was allow the cynicism that seemed rampant around her to steel her heart. Oh no. She liked being soft. In her opinion, her happiness depended on it.

CHAPTER 16

Duncan stood in the shadows, his fingers curling into fists, and he forced himself to remain in the same spot as he watched the English ponce walk off like a peacock, in full swagger and head high, as he ducked out of the alcove he'd whisked Imogen into just a few moments ago.

It had taken everything he possessed not to stomp over, rip the curtain back, and confront the two like an outraged husband. Och. Such a thing would have been ridiculous at best. He had no right to go in blazing with jealousy. Not yet.

So he waited for Imogen to leave the little nook, and after a moment, she did. Her hair was tumbling down, and she looked strangely content in the faint candle glow.

He gritted his teeth as that beastie inside him growled, *Mine*.

He'd let her go. He knew that. This was his fault. Another man had put his hands upon her because he'd been fool enough to let her whisk out of his life with a note. *A note*. What kind of a coward had he turned into?

She turned, wandered down the hall, a slight weave to her step, and then disappeared into a room. Another lady appeared in the hallway, limping, a broken shoe in her hand, and followed Imogen in.

Aha. They were off to the ladies' retiring room. Well, he could wait. He stared at the door, arms folded across his chest. Waiting.

Just a few months ago, he was quite good at waiting. The skill he'd perfected over years of attention to detail seemed to abandon him now. With every passing moment, he grew ever more desirous of her company.

He had no idea what he would say, but he'd come all the way to the Sodom and Gomorrah that was London for her and to make it clear that, though he'd been silent, he was not at ease with the way she'd hied off to London.

At long last, she popped out the door, her hair once again a mass of curls carefully arranged atop her head, the wink of sapphires and diamonds glinting from the golden locks.

There, in the shadows, his whole body came alive at her presence. It was as if it recognized her in a way that he didn't recognize a damned other soul. He

was standing near the nook, in a corner tucked just behind a large statue. As she passed, he reached out and grabbed her hand.

“Roth!” she exclaimed, “I told you I’d—”

“Wrong mon, Sassenach,” he growled softly as he pulled her full against him.

She gasped. “Duncan?”

He should have let her go. He should have bowed. He should have done myriad things. But what he did felt bloody right. Seizing her in his arms, he wove one hand into her newly righted coif, and with the other, he locked her body to his. Before she could utter another word, he stole her lips in a kiss. A kiss born of months consumed in thinking of nothing but her beneath him. Of needing her. Of hungering for her sweet body.

She tensed at first, but after a moment she eased against him and sighed, opening her mouth.

God, she tasted delicious. Champagne and Imogen. Her scent wafted around him, and he never wanted to let her go. Teasing her tongue with his own, he pulled her tighter still, until she gasped for breath.

He cursed the fullness of her skirts. He wanted to take her now. To make her see she belonged to him.

And, by God, hadn’t he thrown all propriety to the wind by coming to London to pursue her?

He broke the kiss and started to pull her down the hall. There had to be a room nearby. A quiet room where he could claim her.

“What are you doing, Duncan?” she asked, sounding drunk from his kiss.

“What do you think, lass?”

“I don’t know what to think,” she said with a sudden clarity.

“I’m trying to find us a place.”

She pulled back, bringing them to a halt. “A place to what?”

“To make love, of course.” The words were so easy to say.

“No, Duncan.”

The look on her face was not the one he had envisioned. There was no dreamy-eyed yielding. The only sign of the passion they’d shared was in the plumpness of her recently kissed lips. A decidedly unpleasant feeling settled in his gut. “What do you mean, no?”

“That’s done between us,” she said firmly, with no sign that a few kisses or caresses could change her mind.

“From the way we kissed just now,” he pointed out, “I’d say it’s far from done.”

Those green eyes of her snapped with anger. “Your opinion of me may not be particularly high, but I am not a doxy to be approached with such surety.”

“All right, so it’s not my finest moment.” And it wasn’t. “But make no mistake, Imogen, I want you.”

“And so you shall have me?” she snapped.

He leveled an unrelenting stare at her. “Yes.”

“Good God, you’re arrogant.”

“I’m a duke.”

She yanked her hand from his grasp, then threw her arms into the air in frustration. “God save me from dukes!”

With that, she turned and stormed away from him, skirts flouncing.

It was his instinct to follow her. But he was also not the begging sort. He had to find a way to make her see that she was his. It was as simple as that. A slow smile pulled at his lips. He hadn’t known this kind of excitement in years. And there, standing in the Dowager Duchess of Hunt’s dark hallway, he knew. Despite it all, despite propriety, despite his past, he would never be able to bear the hands of another man on Imogen, and no woman would ever make him feel as alive as she did. Which meant only one thing. He’d been a damned fool to let her go. Never again would he let her pull her hand from his. Oh no. His Sassenach was coming home to Scotland with him. Forever.



Imogen entered the ballroom, shaking. He was *here*. He’d traveled all the way from Scotland to see her. For one brief moment, her heart had leaped in her chest with hope. Maybe Roth was wrong, she’d thought. Maybe Duncan was ready to love her the way she wanted.

What a fool she was.

The stupid idiot thought he could show up unannounced and simply continue the affair she’d ended? Well, she was done suffering arrogant men. She weaved through the crowd, looking for the Dowager Duchess of Hunt to make her adieus.

A gentleman asked her to dance, and it was on the tip of tongue to say no. She’d had enough tromped-on toes, thank you very much.

But what if Duncan was watching? She wasn't about to cry wounded party and let him think she'd left because of him.

Imogen held out her hand to the young buck who was flashing a come-hither grin he no doubt thought irresistible. She'd dance. She'd dance until bloody dawn if it would teach Duncan that she no longer belonged to him.

Somehow, she knew he was watching.

It was there in the way her skin was hot. In the way her body tingled. Oh yes, he was watching, and she was going to revel in every moment.

CHAPTER 17

*I*t was a miracle that there wasn't a dead Englishman on the dance floor. Duncan gripped the doorframe and ground his teeth together.

She was doing it on purpose. My God, the lass was a devil. Laughing, frolicking, teasing her partners, she was doing everything in her power to suggest she was free and that she belonged to no man.

Well, she was mistaken. She belonged to him.

"You look like you might tear a piece of wood from the wall and eat it, old man."

Duncan rolled his eyes. "Aston."

"Green is a most unbecoming color on you."

"I'm not wearing green," he growled, and then he groaned. "Oh. Yes. I see."

Did he truly appear jealous? He eyed his white-knuckled hand on the doorframe. Yes. He supposed he did. "She's driving me mad."

"She's a woman."

Duncan forced himself to let go of the door. "I don't like it."

Aston gestured toward Imogen dancing lightly with a young man. "It's all your own doing, this."

"I know," Duncan gritted.

"So you're stuck. She's going to rub your nose in it until it's bloody. You know that, don't you? She's got her pride, after all."

Duncan scowled.

"Come, have a drink."

"Always a drink," Duncan mocked.

"Indeed." Aston nodded sagely. "It is the answer to every problem."

Duncan was tempted to stay, to storm the floor and cause a scene. But he couldn't do it. One, it would give Imogen the satisfaction of completely driving him mad, and two, he couldn't ruin his sister's reputation like that.

"Lead on," he sighed.

"Good." Aston clapped him hard on the back.

The next thing Duncan knew, they were striding up Pall Mall and entering the towering edifice of a private club.

“Where are we?” Duncan demanded.

“The Rapier Club,” Aston said. “The Duke of Hunt’s brother Charles owns the place, and several dukes such as Hunt, Darkwell, myself, and Roth meet here.”

Duncan followed Aston up the stairs, feeling positively sulky. He couldn’t remember feeling so perverse, so spoiling for a fight. He was supposed to be mature, above it all. Right now he felt right in the lowest mixes of the worst emotions. And now he was going to be surrounded by a bunch of English arses. Why had he followed Aston?

Oh yes. So he didn’t make a complete ass of himself in front of Imogen.

At last they turned down a quiet corridor and headed into a large room filled with stuffed green couches, great fireplaces, and various weaponry hanging on the walls.

The Dukes of Hunt and Darkwell sat near the fire, glasses of brandy in hand, both looking slightly stunned.

“What’s wrong with them?” Duncan asked.

Aston whispered, “They’re suffering the wrath of women in the final stages of childbearing.”

“That bad?”

“You’ve no idea.”

That stopped Duncan, and he eyed Aston. “How do *you* have an idea?”

Aston grinned. “How do you think?”

It struck Duncan that of course Aston likely had a few bastards strewn over the world. The man was a complete hound. An amusing hound. But a hound nonetheless.

Hunt looked up. “Blackburn! What brings you into civilization?”

Duncan bristled at the suggestion that he was a barbarian, but remembered the man was suffering undo stress. “Business.”

“He’s pining for Lady Cavendish,” Aston said.

Darkwell boomed with laughter. “I could have told you that.”

“And she’s having none of it,” Aston added.

“I could have told you that, too,” Darkwell stated, clearly feeling better now knowing he and Hunt were not the only ones suffering at the hands of a woman.

“A drink,” Duncan gritted. “I was promised a drink.”

Laughing, Hunt poured out two more glasses of brandy, handed them to Duncan and Aston, then topped off his own and Darkwell’s. “I think we’re going to need more.”

"I've already ordered four bottles," a deep voice said from the door.

Duncan turned, glass midair, and spat, "You!"

The tall, dark-haired man who oozed arrogance arched his brows and gave a cheeky smile. "Whatever you accuse me of, I'm innocent."

Duncan squared his shoulders. "I saw you."

"Saw me do what?" the man countered easily.

"You. . ." He gestured with his glass. This womanizing ass had been alone with Imogen. He'd seen them disappear together. "You. . ."

The man sauntered into the room. "We've established that it is apparently *me*."

Marvelous. Duncan was sounding more and more like a moron every second that passed.

"I saw you with her," Duncan said, his gut tightening with jealous fury.

"Good fellow," the man drawled. "I've been with a good many women. Be more specific."

Aston groaned. "Don't, Blackburn—"

"Right," growled Duncan. He threw his glass to the floor and charged the man.

To his surprise, the Englishman moved quickly and smoothly. But not quite quickly enough.

Duncan barreled into his middle and took them both to the ground.

"Roth!" Hunt shouted. "Win for England!"

Roth, the name of his opponent apparently, grabbed Duncan's head and began wrenching it in a startling show of wrestling skills. The man was far more accomplished than he looked in his perfect silk coat.

Duncan growled, twisted, and managed to get on top. He hauled back a fist, ready to let fly, when a pair of hands grabbed him from behind and then a large splash of liquid hit him in the face.

Roth stood, tugging on his waistcoat.

Duncan heaved for breath, annoyed he hadn't got in even one solid blow. "This mon is a cad!" he roared.

Aston sighed. "Indeed, the Duke of Roth is a cad. But he is not Lady Cavendish's lover."

Roth's eyes narrowed as he glanced from Aston to Duncan then Duncan to Aston. Something dawned in his eyes as he glared at Duncan now, lifted his hand, and pointed. "You!"

“What?” Duncan shoved a hand through his wet hair. “Now it’s *me*? What do you accuse me of?”

Roth blinked then demanded, “Is it midnight yet?”

Duncan eyed the man like he was mad. “Aye.”

Roth ran toward the wall and began to pull down a beautifully arched bow.

“What the blazes are you doing, Roth?” Hunt demanded. “Charles will have your balls if you damage his toys.”

Roth pulled out an arrow from the hanging quiver and started to notch it. “It is perfectly legal to shoot a Scotsman with a bow and arrow on a Sunday.”

“Bloody hell,” Darkwell groaned, striding over to Roth.

The man wanted to kill him? *Him*? When he was as blameless as a saint in this matter?

“You ass,” Roth growled as he lifted the bow and arrow, ready to aim at Duncan.

Duncan refused to quail. He strode toward Roth. “I am an innocent mon. It’s you who is the villain.”

“You broke her heart,” Roth bit out coldly.

Duncan stopped, astonished. “What?”

“Imogen, you sodding Scot,” Roth said coolly from behind the bow. “You made her feel unworthy.”

“Roth, no blood,” Hunt said. “I’ll never hear the end of it from Charles.”

“I want to shoot him,” Roth replied.

“It will ruin the carpet,” Darkwell returned.

Duncan gaped. What the hell was wrong with them? “Damn the carpet. What do you mean, I broke her heart?”

Roth let out a bark of disgust. “God save me from Scots.”

Darkwell rolled his eyes. “We know you’re an odd fish, Blackburn, but surely you realize you toyed with the lady’s affections most cruelly.”

Duncan hesitated. He’d never thought he was cruel. “I dinna. She said. . . She said. . .”

“What?” Roth challenged, still aiming the bow. “That it would mean nothing?”

Duncan stared stupidly, beginning to think perhaps he deserved to be shot. “Aye.”

“And did it?” Aston asked softly.

Duncan gave a fierce shake of his head. How could he explain that Imogen had changed his life, leaving him feeling completely confused in a world he had

thought he understood.

“Ah,” Hunt sighed. “Women are the devil.”

At that, all the Englishmen nodded, once again leaving Duncan all the more confused. Were they just perverse for the sake of it? For the life of him, he’d never understand the English. But perhaps, since Imogen was herself English, they might help him. “So what do I do?”

“Do you want her, man?” Roth demanded. “Not to change her. Not to make her proper, but to have *her*?”

“I do, but she turned me down flat tonight.” She’d made it quite clear they were over.

A servant quickly entered with five bottles of brandy, then left. Aston immediately passed a bottle to each man.

Duncan took a swig and then another. The night was descending into chaos, and perhaps at this point, brandy truly was the answer. It had been years since he’d let himself imbibe. Tonight, what with the carryings-on, seemed as good as any to fall from grace.

“Well, you simply need to ask her in a way she can’t refuse,” Darkwell mused.

“How’s that?” Duncan asked, taking another drink.

“Well, I kidnapped Cordelia,” Hunt stated, a pleased grin brightening his features.

Duncan sputtered. “I beg your pardon?”

Hunt, who seemed to be downing his brandy like it was tea and had likely had a few before the others had arrived, gestured wildly with his bottle. “Kidnapped her. Stole her out of the house, bundled her into a coach, and drove to a private house.”

Duncan didn’t think that sounded like a very good idea. He took another drink.

“Absconding with the treasure!” Aston declared. “Marvelous.”

“Really?” Duncan echoed. “Imogen would like this?”

Darkwell threw himself down into a chair. “What woman wouldn’t? It’s passionate. It’s wild. It’s—”

“Kidnapping,” Duncan cut in, beginning to feel a bit dazed from the drink. All three men espousing he grab Imogen were well versed with ladies. That much was clear. Could it be they were right? Did Imogen simply need him to *steal* her?

That was certainly in custom with dramatic acts of the passion. The Earl of Rochester had kidnapped his wife in the last century. Others had done it. It was a grand gesture, to be sure. Yes. He grinned. "Roth, what do you say? You seem to be her friend."

Though the idea that Roth was her friend still rankled, it was clear the man simply wished to protect Imogen.

Roth was silent for a long moment. "If you can manage it, Blackburn, I can't imagine anything would please her more."

Duncan weaved a little, then took another drink. A feeling, strangely like suspicion, niggled his innards. He ignored it. He had to make Imogen see she was the woman for him and that she'd spent her last night, albeit dancing, in the arms of another man.

"Slainte, Your Graces," he said. "Who would have thought English lords would prove to be so helpful?"

Aston pounded him on the back. "Of course, old man. Of course."

CHAPTER 18

*I*mogen's feet were killing her, her hair was drooping again, and she couldn't wait to take off her corset. It had taken her several kisses on cheeks, protestations of adoration of her female acquaintances, and quick avoidance of the determined hands of young gentlemen before she'd finally been able to stumble out of the ball toward her coach, the sun about to rise.

She fought a sigh. She hadn't seen Duncan in over two hours, and she had the disheartening feeling that perhaps instead of being enraged by jealousy, he'd simply decided her not worth it and headed back home. Well, if he had, at least she knew where they stood, and she could get on with her life.

Perhaps spring in Italy was the thing. She'd never been to Venice, and the spirited city might lift her spirits from the mire in which they seemed stuck.

She stood waiting for her coach to roll to the door, unable to bear waiting inside any longer. Surely it would be along any moment.

She was one of the last group of guests to leave and should have avoided the crush of vehicles departing, and yet, she waited. She shifted her weight from one foot to the other.

The sound of a coach drew her attention.

The coach was barreling down the street in the early hour, unheeded by the usual traffic on the popular residence street.

She narrowed her eyes. How odd.

It wasn't her coach. She was grateful for that, otherwise she would have had to have a conversation about safe driving.

The coach swept up to the dowager's house.

A strange feeling shimmied through her. The crest on the coach was familiar. Very familiar.

The door popped open, and Duncan jumped out and staggered, kilt swinging. He spotted her, then ran in her direction.

Her mouth dropped open. What the devil?

Before she could even formulate a rational thought, Duncan's strong hands grabbed her by the waist and hoisted her over his shoulder.

"Duncan!" she exclaimed. "Duncan, put me down!"

“Nay, lassie!” he bellowed.

Had he gone mad? She pounded his back.

He ignored her, handling her as though she weighed nothing more than the silk she was wearing.

“Duncan!” she shouted one last time, hoping to penetrate whatever madcap mood had overcome him.

Instead of a reasonable response, he bounced her on his shoulder as he ran for his coach, then flung her, without ceremony, onto the opposite seat.

Gasping for breath, she couldn’t believe what was happening. Duncan hadn’t just absconded with her, had he? It was so completely out of his character.

He slammed the door shut, and the coach took off.

Then the Duke of Blackburn grinned at her. Grinned! A jolly, wide grin, no less. Clearly, he was pleased with himself.

“Duncan,” she asked carefully, half-afraid he’d left his brain in the street, “what are you doing?”

He wagged his dark brows at her. “Claiming what’s mine.”

His voice was particularly deep and jovial.

And. . . from the brandy wafting toward her, there was only one conclusion to make.

She narrowed her eyes. “Are you drunk?”

“No!” he exclaimed. Then, giving her a sheepish look, he admitted, “Perhaps a little. But the dukes are to blame. Not I.”

“Which dukes?” she asked.

“Hunt. Darkwell. Aston. . .” He let out a rough growl. “That fellow Roth who I thought was your lover. Not a bad fellow actually. . .” Duncan frowned. “Why are we talking about them?”

She groaned. She was going to kill her friends’ husbands and Aston *and* Roth. How had they persuaded the terribly practical, ever-so-proper Duke of Blackburn to throw all caution and sense to the wind? On the other hand, a part of her delighted to see him so merry, but it wasn’t who he really was. She had to remember that.

“Pull the coach over, Duncan,” she ordered, like one might order a determined little boy.

He grinned again. “No.”

“Duncan,” she warned.

“*Imogen*,” he said, mocking her tone.

“Now be serious!” she exclaimed.

“I’m very serious,” he replied. “I’ve been serious all my life. I’m done with it. Indeed, I am. But I am serious about stealing you. After that?” He brushed his hands as if getting rid of something. “No more seriousness for me.”

How adorable he was. She longed to believe him, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t let herself be tempted. “You don’t mean that. You’re only saying so because of the brandy.”

“Do you question my word, madam?” he challenged, his shoulders squaring.

“Only your sobriety.”

He laughed.

She closed her eyes for a moment, half-believing that when she opened them, she’d still be out in front of the Dowager Duchess of Hunt’s house, waiting for her coach. When she opened her eyes, he was still staring down at her.

“Now,” he said with a surprising degree of sudden clarity, “you’re coming with me to Scotland.”

The words pierced her heart. They were words she’d dreamed of now for months.

He shivered. “It’s quite cold at present, don’t you agree?”

With that, he reached across the space and hauled her onto his lap. “Let’s cuddle.”

She threw her hands up in the air, letting out a cry of frustration. It was like the gods were making fun of her late-night fantasies of Duncan coming to London and sweeping her away.

He took the opportunity to loop his arms around her waist and nuzzle her neck. “I’ve missed you, Imogen.”

She groaned. “I bet you have.”

He no doubt missed the way they’d done so well together in bed. A typical man.

He lifted his head and gazed down at her, his face remarkably without scheme. “I have. I have! My life has been a barren wasteland without your sunny presence.”

She arched a brow at that. My, for a drunkard he spoke quite poetically. . . Which was entirely out of his character. So perhaps it was the drink that induced this amazing part of him.

“You’re scowling,” he purred against her cheek as he lowered his forehead to hers.

“I am?” she asked, surprised.

“Mmm, you are,” he said softly. “I thought I was the one who did all the scowling.”

She sat stunned, completely flummoxed by the situation. “Well, this isn’t how I planned on spending the early hours of this morning.”

“Plans are boring,” he said. “I’ve ruined my life with plans.”

“Duncan, you don’t sound at all like yourself.” She needed to point this out to him, though she doubted he would listen.

“My self has made my life a barren wasteland,” he said dramatically.

Oh dear. It seemed he had decided *barren wasteland* were his favorite words at present. She really was going to have to kill the members of the Dukes’ Club. Perhaps not Darkwell and Hunt. They were about to be fathers. But a slight maiming would do.

“Duncan, you’re going to regret this the moment the drink wears off.”

“I’m not. Indeed not, lass. Letting you go has been my only regret.”

Oh, why, why did he have to say such things when he wasn’t himself? Every word he uttered was a word she’d longed to hear! It wasn’t fair, but she knew too well the power of brandy on a man’s tongue, or a woman’s for that matter. It manipulated one into saying things one didn’t truly mean. So, even though she longed to relax into Duncan’s strong embrace and ride with him all the way to Scotland, she knew that in one day’s time, somewhere between London and York, he’d be back to grumbling about propriety and mistakes and behaving as one ought.

And she’d have to remind him what a terrible duchess she would make. It would hurt. It would hurt far too much.

“Let me out, Duncan,” she said again, only this time more firmly.

He squeezed her. “Never.”

She jabbed a hand into his ribs, determined to make him see reason. “Now.”

“Och, lass,” he exclaimed. “There’s no need to be violent. I know this is what you secretly desire.”

For a moment, the air about them turned red, and she blinked, ready to explode. Instead, she asked tightly, “I beg your pardon?”

“It’s what they said.” He nodded as if convincing himself. “You’d love to be kidnapped.”

“*They?*” she questioned, her eye starting to twitch. She truly was going to murder someone.

He smiled, apparently oblivious to her growing temper. “I had my doubts, but they assured me it would work like a charm. Now, how about a kiss, lass?”

The coach was rolling to a stop, no doubt stuck in the horrendous London traffic that grew in the early hours.

She drew in a deep breath, pursed her lips, and steeled herself for what needed to be done.

He was leaning down, clearly getting ready to bestow his dukely affection on her.

Imogen gritted her teeth and popped him in the jaw.

She was not about to be the plaything of a bunch of dukes.

His hold loosened, and he looked at her as if she'd stomped on a puppy.

A brief flare of regret burned in her heart. But no. She wasn't having this. She wasn't to be a subject of pity. She certainly wasn't about to have her destiny stolen from her. What did these men think? That she was naught but a bit of lace to be waved about at whim?

As Duncan gaped in his drunken state, she wrenched the coach door open. He grasped for her, but she smacked his hands away and jumped down.

Her slippers squelched in the mud.

She winced, but then she picked up her skirts and started trotting quickly through the varied vehicles lining the street. She managed to reach the pavement before Duncan caught up with her.

Duncan scooped her up and turned her to him. "Lass, do you hate me so?" he demanded.

Tears stung her eyes. "Duncan, I don't hate you. I never could."

"Then why?"

"I need more," she said, though her throat was tightening, and each word was a painful utterance. "So much more than this game that you and I are at."

He blinked, his hold releasing. "I'm not enough, then?"

She lifted her chin. She had to make him understand. She had to make it clear that she'd never be his, not the way he wanted. She wanted to be a wife, a mother, and loved. Loved for who she was, not who her husband needed her to be. "No, Duncan. Not the way you are."

Tears slipped down her cheeks. Oh goodness, it hurt so much.

His face hardened. "I see. I've made a terrible mistake, then."

She nodded, forcing the movement. "I can't make you happy."

"So you'll make us both miserable instead?" Duncan let her slip out of his arms, his eyes strangely bright.

"That's right," she whispered.

“Then, madam, you must let me escort you home. I couldn’t possibly leave you on your own on the street.”

She blinked. It hit home that they were standing on busy London pavement, the street hawkers beginning to cry their wares. “Thank you.”

Holding out her hand to him, she couldn’t stop the tears from burning her eyes. She looked away so he wouldn’t see. She needed more. She needed more than a drunken escapade and protestations of desire.

If he had truly thought such a thing would work, Duncan didn’t know her at all, and it was a blessing that they would finally be out of each other’s lives.

CHAPTER 19

Duncan clutched his head. One might have thought that given the amount of alcohol he'd consumed nothing could hurt worse than his stomach or his skull at present. One would be wrong. It was his heart that ached the most, leaving his whole, burning body a secondary pain. In short, he felt like utter shite.

Parts of the evening were a bit mysterious to his memory, but he knew he'd acted like a fool. No, not just a fool, an arse. He'd cornered Imogen in a hall and treated her like a doxy, and then. . . *then* he'd kidnapped her.

What in God's name had possessed him to listen to Englishmen when it came to the courting of a woman? Drink. It was the only plausible explanation. . . And, well, desperation.

There was a soft knock on the door.

He glared at the panel. He'd already told his butler he wasn't to be bothered.

"Go away," he snapped.

"Alas, such tones don't work with me, brother."

A faint ray of hope glimmered at the sound of Rosalind's voice. What on earth was she doing in London?

The door opened, and she peered in. "Are you decent?"

He sighed, feeling ridiculously sorry for himself. "Come in."

To his astonishment, she had a tray balanced on one hand.

Silently, she poured out two steaming cups of coffee, then passed one to him.

They sat quietly, sipping the dark brew.

"I thought you were going abroad," he said.

"I am. I just need a few gowns."

Then there was silence. Duncan hoped beyond hope that Rosalind would leave well enough alone and that they could avoid discussing Lady Cavendish and his idiotic behavior. Still, he savored her sudden presence and the slightly bitter taste of the coffee.

"It's all over town," she finally said.

He stopped, cup midair. "I beg your pardon?"

Instead of amusement, there was a sort of sadness in her gaze. "Duncan, I've already had three people call this morning asking if you and Lady Cavendish are

planning a wedding at our estate, or if you were heading straight to Gretna Green.”

He held absolutely still. Could he will this situation away? He had to. For surely this couldn't be happening. After years of perfect behavior, of being certain that he would be the prow which steered his family to a perfect reputation, it could not be he who dashed the family upon the rocks of scandal. Not after years of self-denial. The gods couldn't that cruel, could they? After all, it had just been one night of madness.

“You can't be serious,” he whispered.

She gave a sympathetic smile. “You've ruined what little reputation Lady Cavendish had. If you don't marry, she will now be cast out to the very outer edges of society, for she will be on the tip of every *ton* tongue by teatime.”

He had ruined *her*? The irony was far, far too painful.

“I don't understand,” he said.

“You were seen by several people this morning, jumping out of your coach and grabbing Lady Cavendish. You swept her up and tossed her into the vehicle and departed with her. It can't be ignored. If one or two people had seen it, perhaps. . . But several notorious gossips were waiting for their coaches when it happened.”

Duncan blinked. “I ruined *her*.”

Rosalind grabbed one of his hands. “It would seem that way.”

“Damnation.”

“It's not so bad,” she said gently. “You love her, don't you?”

He choked and looked away. Was he so transparent? After the way he'd treated Imogen, would she ever love him in return? “What a bitter pill.”

“It is not,” Rosalind countered. “She'll have to marry you now. You can be happy, Duncan.”

“She'll *have* to marry me,” he said, his tight throat making his voice rough. “You said it. It won't be for love.”

“I've never seen you together, but I imagine that you wouldn't love without cause.” She squeezed his hand. “Go to her. Spill your heart before her.”

How the devil had his little sister matured into such a wise and kind young woman? “I said things to her. . . in Scotland.”

Rosalind let go of his hand, then cupped his cheek. “We all say things we regret. Surely she is a woman of understanding. Trust that she will listen, and take this opportunity that has been handed to you. You were holding yourself

back before. Now you can have her as your wife and companion. You can have her forever, Duncan. Don't waste this."

Forever. God, it sounded so right. But how did he make Imogen see that he had been a fool? A fool for not being clear that he wanted her in his heart and life every day from this to the last? Not as a mistress, but as his duchess.

"Thank you, Ros. God did me a good turn the day you were born."

"And don't you forget it," she said with a saucy lift of her eyebrow.



Cordelia took a giant bite of buttered scone, then said around the crumbs, "He didn't!"

Imogen groaned, then cradled her face in her hands. "He did."

Kate laughed, her palms resting on her full belly. "Oh dear. The poor man."

"Poor man?" Imogen countered. "It's me who was kidnapped."

"But our husbands did get ahold of him," Cordelia pointed out.

Imogen sighed and leaned back against the soft blue damask in her morning room.

To her shock, both of her very pregnant friends had pounded down her door this morning, insisting she be woken and brought downstairs.

They had broken the news to her.

She was ruined. Utterly ruined. This was as bad as when Kathryn and her husband were discovered in flagrante delicto at the opera. This was particularly annoying because she and Duncan hadn't even kissed in the coach during their perverse escapade!

Imogen picked up a cake. She didn't care if it was before noon. She was going to eat a plate of them. She popped it into her mouth and chewed, taking her frustrations out on the pastry. As she did, she considered Kathryn's point. While Duncan was a tough fellow, being ambushed by the likes of Hunt, Darkwell, Aston, and Roth was not to be dismissed. Especially since the dukes had clearly gotten Duncan sauced.

Imogen took a sip of tea. "Well, there's nothing for it. I have to go to Italy."

"Italy is full of Italians," Cordelia said bluntly.

Imogen rolled her eyes. "They can't all be that bad."

"Well, I suppose it depends on what you're after," Cordelia said thoughtfully. "If you need something done quickly, as we often did in Egypt, I don't suggest

an Italian but. . . er. . . If you'd like a bit of wine and song and conversation, they're quite lovely."

"Exactly," Imogen said. "I shan't be going for business, Cordy dear."

Cordelia nodded. "But surely you could find wine and song and conversation without heading on such a horrendous journey. I've taken it, remember? Badly sprung coaches. Bugs in the inns, bad food, rotten—"

"Yes, yes, it shall be very trying, I'm sure," Imogen cut in. "But it's what I need, and I can't stay here."

"Why not?" Kate demanded. "I did after that scandal with my husband before he actually was my husband."

"Yes, but that's the point!" Imogen put her teacup down. "You married Darkwell."

"Aren't you going to marry Duncan?" Cordy asked around another bite of scone.

"One, he has never asked—"

"Give the man a moment," Kate cut in. "The scandal occurred only this morning. No doubt, he's done in by the worst head."

Imogen put her teacup down and wrung her hands together, hating herself for feeling so cut up. "I can't marry him like this. Not with him asking me out of a sense of honor."

"But it is bloody ironic, isn't it?" Cordelia challenged. "That *he* ruined *you* after all that tosh about you and your reputation."

Imogen winced. She never should have shared that conversation with her friends. She could only blame it on a few too many glasses of red wine. "Well, he is a duke with a sister of a marriageable age."

"Listen to you, defending the man," Kate teased. "One would think he was your husband already and you his devoted wife."

"Stop that!" ordered Imogen.

Kate blinked innocently. "Stop what?"

"Look, you can go," Cordelia put in, licking her fingers without any care for manners in her very pregnant state. "We shall miss you dreadfully. But you *can* stay. You know there's a whole set of people in London who'd welcome you with open arms."

Yes. She'd been invited to their parties countless times, and she'd considered going, but she'd always held on to her thread of respectability. Maybe it was time to let all that go. "It's just so tempting to leave."

"You mean to run away," Cordelia said loudly.

Imogen glared at the audacious duchess. “Now, don’t hold back your thoughts.”

Cordelia winked. “No one could accuse me of that.”

“Um. . . Imogen?” Kate shifted on the silk-covered chair.

Imogen sighed. “Yes?”

“I. . . I think. . .”

Imogen stared at her friend, who was wide-eyed. Kate had also gone as white as a sheet, and she was gasping.

“Oh goodness!” Imogen leaped up. “Are you having pains?”

Kate grabbed the arm handles of the chair and groaned.

Cordy gaped.

“I’d take that as a yes,” said Imogen, her heart jolting with excitement and a touch of fear.

“I’m not ready!” Kate wailed.

“My dear, that doesn’t really matter,” Imogen said gently, taking her friend’s hand. “Your babe is.”

Kate nodded, her face panicked.

“Are the pains strong?” Imogen asked.

Kate let out a wail.

“My goodness!” Imogen bit her lower lip. The pains seemed like they weren’t even two minutes apart, which was quite quick. Surely the labor needed hours to progress. Even so, she couldn’t let Kate go home.

“Imogen, what do I do?” Kathryn asked with a surprisingly girlish note.

Kate was the only person besides Duncan who knew she’d had a baby.

A wave of apprehension passed over Imogen. What if she passed her bad luck to her friend? No. No, she wouldn’t think such a thing. She’d be here for Kate. She could do that.

“You just think about the beautiful babe who will be in your arms in just a few hours.”

Cordy lumbered to her feet. “What shall I do? I have some knowledge of animals and—”

“Cordy,” Imogen declared. “Send for the Duke of Hunt.”

Cordy nodded and immediately waddled toward the hall.

Imogen took Kate’s hands and looked into her friend’s blue-gray eyes. “You were made to do this, my dearest. Your body knows what to do.”

Kate bit down on her lower lip and nodded. “You won’t leave me, will you?”

“Never.” Imogen held Kate for a long moment, then kissed her friend’s forehead. “Come along, my dear, it’s time to walk.”

“Walk?” Kate yelped.

“Best thing,” Imogen replied cheerfully. She’d never forget the army of midwives her mother had secured for her. They’d been kind old crones who’d made a terrifying labor as peaceful as possible.

“Aren’t I supposed to get into bed?”

“Only if you want a royal birth, like at Versailles. Are you a royal?”

Kate gave a laugh and clutched Imogen’s arm. “I’d happily be a peasant if my baby would be born safely.”

“Now, you just envision a perfect pink baby, and we’ll have a chat.”

Imogen helped her friend out into the hall.

At that moment, Darkwell stormed into the foyer, his face lined with terror.

Kate grinned at him between her pains.

Darkwell ran forward and grabbed her up into his arms. “You’re well?”

“Imogen is taking care of me,” Kate replied simply.

He leaned down and kissed her softly.

Kate suddenly tensed, then let out a cry.

Darkwell had the oddest expression on his face. “My boots are wet.”

“Imogen!” Kate cried. “What’s happening?”

Imogen smiled at her friend. “Your baby is coming. And soon.”

“Will you wait here, Your Grace?” Imogen asked.

Darkwell gave her a look that suggested she was lacking mental faculties. “Wherever my wife goes, I go.”

Imogen couldn’t stop the swell of admiration she felt for the duke. Most men left their wives to labor, scared and surrounded by servants, as they sat downstairs or at their club, drinking and smoking away.

“Then I suggest we begin our way to a bedroom, Your Grace, unless you wish your firstborn to enter this world in a hall.”

Darkwell swept Kate up into his arms, cradling her against his chest. His gaze was filled with devotion and slight panic. “Lead on, Lady Cavendish.”

Imogen nodded, then started up the stairs. In just a few hours, brand new life would grace this house, and it was the most wonderful thing she could have imagined on such a bleak day.

CHAPTER 20

Duncan had expected a cold reception. He had not expected wailing. He stared up at the frescoed ceiling, wondering where the god-awful caterwauling was coming from. Was Imogen dying? His heart stopped for a moment, and he glanced wildly around, looking for someone to give him some sort of answer, but the butler had left him standing alone in the open foyer, hat in hand.

Something was greatly amiss, and he had a strong feeling that it was more than just social ruination.

Cordelia, the Duchess of Hunt, came down the stairs, her hand propped on her back, her big belly prominent before her. She spotted him, then gave him a knowing smile. "Your Grace, a pleasure."

"Is everything well?" he asked, amazed at the slightly nervous tone in his deep voice.

She nodded graciously. "Oh yes."

"But—but—" He glanced up toward the ceiling.

"The Duchess of Darkwell is at work bringing a child into this world."

Duncan dropped his astounded gaze to Cordelia, who had crossed to him. "Here?"

"Yes. At her dearest friend's residence. Where better?"

"A good point." It occurred to him that he was being a thoughtless idiot. "Would you like my arm?"

"Do I look ill?" she asked, batting her lashes as if daring him to suggest she was incapable in some way.

Duncan cleared his throat, flummoxed again. "Not at all." He tapped his hat against his leg, uncertain what to say to the duchess. "Her Grace is attended by the finest physicians?"

"She is attended by a midwife," Cordy said brightly. "There is a physician waiting if anything goes terribly amiss."

"Good. Good." Though really he had no idea about it. It struck him it was such a woman's affair that a man really had no business trying to tell a woman how to give birth, and yet, that seemed to be the growing fashion. He could still

recall the way the court of Versailles had viewed a birth as a public affair. This was much better. Private, with one's friends.

He glanced toward the door. "Darkwell? Should I fetch him?"

Cordy shook her head. "He's here. Looks a bit worse for wear, but he's holding her hand. I think he might tear the house to pieces since he can't do anything for her pain, but he's being a good husband."

Duncan blew out a breath, trying to imagine what that would be like. What if Imogen was giving birth to their child, crying out so sharply in pain, and he could do nothing? The thought was impossible to contemplate.

"Where is Lady Cavendish?" he asked.

"Upstairs. Assisting."

Ah. He frowned. Surely such a thing would be painful for her after losing her own child. But then again, Imogen's heart was so full that he couldn't imagine her ever not helping a friend even if personal discomfort stood in the way.

"You made a mess of things, didn't you?" Cordelia said abruptly.

He was about to protest but realized there was no point. "I have, yes."

"Why in God's name did you listen to those fools?"

"Well," he said, prepared to be astonishingly honest, "Hunt said he'd kidnapped you, and I've seen how happy you are together."

She laughed, a devilishly amused sound. "Yes, but he must have neglected to mention I escaped his kidnapping attempt in the middle of the night and was walking down a dark country road, hands trussed, to get away from him and his madness."

Duncan let out a dry laugh of his own, then rubbed a hand over his tired face. "He did indeed neglect that pertinent information."

She smiled fondly, clearly thinking of her husband. "Silly man. That is not what made me fall in love with him."

"What did?"

"Seeing his imperfections, seeing how well they fit mine."

Duncan gaped. "His *imperfections*?"

Cordelia patted his arm. "No one wants to be married to a perfect spouse, Duncan. Far too much to keep up with. Imogen needs you to want her just the way she is."

"I do!" he exclaimed.

Cordelia arched a skeptical brow.

"I confess I may have given her the impression that I feel otherwise."

"Impression?" Cordelia challenged.

He groaned. "I may have flat-out said she couldn't be my duchess due to her past, but I never ever said that her past might prevent my love for her."

"And do you?"

"Pardon?"

"Love her, Duncan? If not, I've no interest in furthering this conversation. You're a fine fellow, but you've many faults. I shouldn't wish my friend to waste her time on a man who's going to give her misery in the long run."

Duncan gaped. He'd never met a woman so blunt. "I love her, Duchess. But she won't hear it."

"Do you wish to marry her?"

"I—I . . . didn't," he confessed. "But now I do."

Her eyes narrowed. "Because of the scandal."

Of course she might think that. Who wouldn't when he had resisted so firmly before? "Not at all. I tried to ask her last night. And failed. Miserably."

Cordelia nodded her approval, a smile warming her face. "That puts a different light on things."

He eyed the brim of his hat, not quite able to bear his desperation. "Do you think she'll say yes? I've come to ask for her hand."

Cordelia sighed. "I don't think so."

Duncan scowled. "Why the devil not?"

She rolled her eyes. "Duncan, what woman wants to wed because the groom has no choice?"

He slapped his hat against his leg. "That's not how it is at all, damn it."

"But she doesn't know that," Cordelia countered quickly. "So you must woo her."

"Woo?" he echoed.

"Yes, sometimes even a duke has to get down on his knees."

It was something he'd never really contemplated. "How?"

"Oh, Duncan." Cordelia grinned. "Even I can't hold your hand the whole way through it. What do you think she'd like?"

Duncan let out a frustrated breath. What *would* Imogen want? If he loved her, he should know, shouldn't he? Suddenly, it hit him. He knew exactly what had to be done. And it wasn't standing, hat in hand, in her home, waiting to save her from society. He gave a slight bow and turned for the door.

"Duncan!" Cordelia called. "Should I tell her you called?"

He glanced over his shoulder and smiled, finally feeling like he might just have the upper hand in all this. "Don't you dare."

Cordelia smiled back and lifted a hand to her lips. "Our secret."

Duncan headed back out into the late London morning, ignoring the stares of the ladies and gentlemen promenading down the street. His heart felt lighter than it had been in months. In fact, it was so damn light he began to whistle a merry tune.



Imogen held the tiny baby in her hands, and tears stung her eyes. The little girl was so beautiful it physically hurt. She smiled down at the wrinkled little face and closed eyes. Her perfect rosebud mouth was slightly pursed. A sigh escaped Imogen's lips as she lifted the baby and sniffed her soft little head.

"I couldn't have done this without you," Kate said from the bed, looking drained but stunning.

In fact, her friend glowed with triumph.

Darkwell had gotten his heart's desire. A girl had been born to them, and mother and babe were absolutely perfect and healthy.

"Tosh," Imogen dismissed, blinking her tears away. "You would have done marvelously."

With that, she gave the baby one last gentle kiss on the forehead, then handed her back to her mother.

It had been two hours since the baby was born, but now they needed sleep. Even she needed a nap. Or tea. Or perhaps a brandy.

Darkwell sat next to his wife on the big bed, his face so proud he looked like he might burst.

Imogen clasped her hands together. "I'll leave you now."

As soon as she was out in the hallway, she placed a hand on her middle and drew in a deep breath. The labor had gone so quickly, so easily, unlike her own. A brief wave of sadness washed over her. She couldn't help it. She missed her baby. Yet, at the same time, the joy on Kathryn's face had made it all worthwhile.

Such hope, such happiness, was what this life was all about. And if she couldn't be a mother, she could be the best auntie there ever was.

She descended the stairs, her whole body heavy with exhaustion. It was just after noon, and though early, a glass of brandy would be just the thing.

Cordelia sat, tucked up in a blanket with a book before the fire. She greeted her with a smile. "I've ordered you a bowl of beef's broth and bread to go with

your libation.”

Imogen grinned. “Very thoughtful. I long to fall into bed, if you must know.”

“I’m sure,” Cordelia said with a strange note to her voice. “But it’s essential you nourish yourself.”

Imogen poured herself a small drink. “And why is that?”

“Because I do think you’re going to have two babies born in this house today.”

Imogen nearly dropped her glass. “I beg your pardon?”

Cordelia gave a shaky grin. “I’ve sent for my husband. The pains are close together, and I’ve been walking up and down the room. Do you think that sufficient? Should I get on all fours?”

Imogen let out a yelp of excitement, plunked her brandy down, and ran over to Cordelia. “My goodness! What a glorious day. Apparently, my drawing room is quite inviting to imminent arrivals!”

Cordelia smiled briefly, took her hand, and stood. “I’m glad you think so. You seem to be quite the attraction to babies.”

Imogen swallowed back the strange, warm feeling that gave her. “Thank you.”

“Imogen?”

“Yes?” she asked gently.

Cordelia’s eyes widened. She leaned forward and whispered, as if confessing the greatest sin in all Christendom, “I’m afraid.”

Imogen squeezed her friend’s hand. “So was Kathryn, and she’s holding her daughter in her arms this very moment.”

Cordelia drew in a deep breath. “You don’t think the luck will have run out, do you?”

Imogen stroked a lock of hair back from Cordelia’s face. “I think the luck is just beginning.”

And she did. Finally, life was starting anew. What better sign than the birth of two babies in her home?

CHAPTER 21

*I*mogen stared out her coach's window, a contented smile on her face.

After several hours, the heir to the Duke and Duchess of Hunt had graced her house. His name was as long as her arm, Anthony James Michael Frederick Eversleigh, Earl of Montieth.

Kathryn and her husband had promptly named their daughter Imogen. Everyone was calling the beautiful little girl Immy.

The house was full of joy, and Imogen had stumbled to bed feeling more peace than she'd felt in quite some time. Though she couldn't ignore the faint hint of longing at the back of her happiness. Some things simply weren't meant to be.

Both couples had taken up residence in her home, and, well, that was marvelous, but she felt rather like an outsider. So it was that her hair was done, a string of rubies graced her throat, and her hair was piled atop her head in soft curls.

Tonight was for her.

She'd waited for the Duke of Blackburn to make his visit, for him to offer marriage as he was supposed to do. But he hadn't come. He'd not even sent a note. He was probably brooding over the glens of his estate in Scotland. Why she'd ever thought he might bow to scandal and marry her was a mystery. She was the one who was ruined, not he. A duke could survive such a thing completely unscathed, while she would be condemned to the demimonde.

It had been something she'd flirted with for sometime but had resisted. Even when Kathryn had lost her reputation, she'd been unwilling to join her friend and the more scandalous parties thrown by London's most notorious.

There was nothing to lose now.

So she tucked her cloak around her frame, glad that spring was just around the corner. It was apt the babies had been born when the crocuses and snowdrops had just broken through the earth. Any day now, they'd see daffodils, too.

It was time to celebrate life.

The coach rolled to a stop in front of the Earl of Albany's infamous and grand residence. She stepped out into the cool night, ready to embrace her new

life.

The footman was young, masked, and bore a rather saucy smile. He held out his gloved hand to her, then slipped her cloak from her shoulders. “Lady Cavendish, the earl will be delighted that you have, at long last, accepted one of his invitations.”

Would he, indeed?

He gestured toward the stairs. . . which led downward.

Her gown was quite shocking. She’d been able to acquire it at the last minute from the actress Elizabeth Barton, an old friend well versed in scandal. She loved the crimson shade and the gold embroidery along the hem and just at the edge of her extremely plumped bosom. In fact, if her bosom had been any more plumped, her bosom would be entirely out!

She hesitated at the foot of the marble stairs. This was the moment. If she wanted to escape to Italy and never have to put on a brave face for all of England, she needed to turn around. Now.

Lifting her chin, she boldly crossed the threshold.

The lavish room was packed with women dressed in scandalous apparel, baring limbs in colored silk stockings. Gentlemen were simply attired in silk shirts, breeches, and cravats, as if they were all ready to disrobe as quickly possible. Hundreds of candles glowed, aloft in golden candelabra, and the ceiling overhead was a tribute to the divine Bacchus and several half-nude nymphs.

“My lady, may I have this dance?”

The deep, rumbling voice sent a shiver down her spine.

It couldn’t be. It was impossible. Her ears were surely deceiving her.

She turned, and there, under the carved stone archway just beside her, golden mask covering the upper half of his gorgeous face, stood the Duke of Blackburn.

My God, he was handsome. It was almost unbelievable how much.

Towering well over six feet, he looked glorious in his simple but elegant black evening coat. She couldn’t imagine a more masculine figure with his dark hair swept back from his strong features and his broad shoulders stretching the perfect cut of his coat.

He held out his hand.

She glanced at it, sniffed, and said, “No.”

“No?” he queried.

Did he honestly expect her to simply fall into his arms after what he’d put her through? “You heard me.”

“Madam, will you, nill you, I will dance with you.”

The play on words from Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew* didn't fall on deaf ears, except, in the play Petruchio said *marry*, not dance. Given their particular situation, his variance irked her. She propped her hands on her hips. "Look here, Your High-and-Mighty Grace, you may think you can boss the world about, but you can't boss me."

"Can't I?" he said with a smile that burned her to her very toes with its wickedness.

She narrowed her eyes. "No."

"Perhaps not," he granted. "But you want to dance with me, you know you do."

She opened her mouth ready to give him a good setdown, but she couldn't manage it. She was simply too stunned. How dare he come here and fling her secret longings in her face? What was he doing here anyway, the Duke of Absolute Propriety?

"Go away," she finally snapped. "This isn't your sort of place."

"What is my sort of place?"

She snorted. "A church."

He placed a hand to his heart, looking far too contrite for it to be genuine. "I grant you I've behaved like a parson, but I'm not all that bad. Now, dance with me?"

She couldn't ever imagine him acting in such a manner as this, except for drunken moments of kidnapping.

She leaned forward and sniffed.

Another wicked grin pulled at his sensual lips. "I'm not inebriated, lass. The only thing I'm drunk on is you."

She blinked as her whole body blossomed with heat. Had he truly just said that?

"Since the cat seems to have your tongue at last, I'll do with you as I will," he said with a slight growl.

"Duncan!" she cried in protest and tugged her hand from his. But he ignored her and led her into the crowded ballroom. Several couples waltzed across the floor, taking the scandalous steps as if they were as natural as breathing.

He couldn't possibly know how to waltz, which fortunately meant she could leave him on the floor looking a right ponce.

She was about to point out such a thing when all of a sudden she was whirling around the floor in his gloriously strong arms. She could have swooned from the pleasure of it.

“You can waltz!” she exclaimed.

“I can,” he agreed.

“How?”

“Shh. If you wish to know my secrets, you’ll have to wait until we marry.”

She knew she should have been furious! Indignant even, that he would say something so ludicrous and cruel. “Don’t say things you don’t mean.”

“About my secrets or our marriage?”

She yanked at his hand, trying to pull free, but instead he pulled her tighter to him. “You’re not going anywhere, lass. You belong in my arms.”

Oh, how she wanted to slap him, but she wanted to savor the feel of him, for surely it wouldn’t last.

How could she deny his embrace when she’d wanted it so much? And he was embracing her in such a place, a place he never should have set foot in! Instead of stomping on his foot as instinct commanded her, she gave over to her foolish side. He couldn’t mean it about marriage, and if he was going to propose out of a sense of duty, she already knew her answer. A marriage based solely on him sacrificing himself to honor was one she’d have nothing to do with. Still, she needed to savor this for all the nights she would have to endure without him.

Gasping for breath, she allowed herself to smile. Her toes barely touched the ground as his long legs ate up the ballroom floor, effortlessly avoiding the other couples who were all be-masked.

As the music ended, he clasped her hand tighter, waiting for another song to begin. She didn’t resist. If they didn’t speak, the moment would go on. She could be in his arms, held by him, touched by him, and never have to ask a single thing. They could just enjoy each other as they once had in Scotland.

She longed to rest her head against his shoulder, and then it occurred to her that she could. This was the Earl of Albany’s infamous Devil’s Dance, not a *ton* ball. Allowing herself a small sigh of contentment, Imogen rested her cheek against the perfect silk over his hard muscles. He smelled delicious. Some spice she didn’t know and pure man.

“I’ve missed you,” he said softly.

She swallowed. How did she reply? Truthfully. She’d never been one to hide behind pretty banter. “I’ve missed you, too.”

“Even if I’ve acted the arse?”

“In truth, your nature seems to be half arse,” she said. “Don’t tell anyone I said it, but it’s part of your charm. . . Except for when you’re acting the complete grump.”

He laughed. "Or whisking you into a coach."

She tilted her head back and stared at him, not sure what to make of his strange behavior. "Or that."

He winced. "Terribly bad maneuver. Can you forgive me?"

She eyed him carefully. "I seem to have to forgive you a great deal."

"I'm a slow learner."

She laughed. Was he actually making fun of himself? But she couldn't allow herself to be taken in. He was with her now only for duty, surely. "Why are you here?"

He leaned down and whispered against her ear, "Because I want you."

Her smile dimmed. She should have known it. Carefully, she began to pull away from him. She should have stomped on him. This was going to be far too painful. She turned her face away, twisting her hands in his grip, determined to get away from him and her own foolishness.

"Wait, Imogen. I'm not finished." He pulled her to his frame, spinning them in a slow circle about the floor. "I love you."

She stumbled as her fury fizzled into confusion, and tripped right over his feet.

He caught her, then escorted her off the floor, sweeping her into one of the darkened hallways designed for lovers.

She couldn't catch her breath, and despite the orchestra, the only thing she could hear was her pounding heart. He loved her?

When they'd slipped into a dark nook, curtained off from the rest of the hall, he took her into his arms then cupped her chin. "I've never said this to you. I've never had the courage. I've told you I want you, and I do. But, Imogen, I love you. I love you to the point of pain."

Tears stung her eyes. Again! When had she turned into such a watering pot? She'd dreamed of those words coming from his lips. Now that she was hearing them, she had no idea how to react, except to say what was in her heart. "I love you, too."

A sigh of relief escaped him, and he tilted back her head, stealing a kiss from her lips. "I never want to let you go. Never," he growled.

"Then don't!"

He wove his hand into her hair, tilted her head back, and took her mouth in a searing kiss. She melted against him. It was impossible not to give in to the power of his desire and her own. She'd missed him so much. It only seemed natural to hold on to him, to open to him.

Duncan slid his hands over her bodice, then cupped her breasts through her tight bodice.

She moaned and pulled at his coat.

But he didn't have the patience.

Instead, he worked her skirts up to her hips, stroking her stockinged thighs.

"I never want you in another man's arms," he said, lowering to his knees. He traced his fingers over the vee of her thighs, then slipped his fingers into her wet heat.

She gasped. "Never."

"You're mine."

She bit her lower lip and nodded.

"Say it," he demanded.

"I'm yours," she replied, her voice a breathy wisp of need.

With that, he pushed her thighs apart and kissed the sweet place between her legs.

Her muscles nearly gave way, and he held her up, placing her hands on his shoulders.

He was relentless as he teased her. Each breath came faster and faster. Her gaze fluttered shut, and she could barely believe this wasn't a dream.

With each flick of his tongue, she was tossed higher and higher toward release. Abruptly, he stopped and walked her back toward the damask-covered wall. He lifted her, wrapping her legs around his waist. She was stunned by how effortless the motion was for him, and then he was freeing his cock from his breeches.

With one firm move, he thrust home. A cry of pleasure ripped from her throat. Their joining was almost too much, too perfect. She'd longed for this, and now she felt claimed. She rocked her hips, and he pounded into her, but as he did, he gazed into her eyes.

Her heart skipped a beat, for she could have sworn she saw worship there.

He slipped his hand between them and stroked her most sensitive spot. She could no longer think but only feel. Her body shook as wave after wave of pleasure cascaded through her. Duncan let out a wild, masculine noise as he came inside her.

She held on to him for dear life, afraid if she did let go that he would disappear. His breathing slowed, and he leaned down, resting his forehead against hers.

"I love you, Imogen. I love you."

She smiled and stroked the side of his face. "And I you."

"Promise me you'll never leave me again."

She found her eyes wet with tears and nearly laughed. It was time to embrace this easy-to-tears and love side of her. "I promise."

She wouldn't. She needed him. There was something about Duncan that made her feel whole, and he, in turn, needed her.

He slipped her down from the wall, and her legs shook.

A soft laugh passed her lips. She felt drunk. In all her life, she'd never felt so wonderful. Still, she had to ask. "Why now, Duncan?"

He hesitated, a sort of hardness glinting in his eyes. "Because I'm not my father."

"I don't understand," she said simply.

Duncan nodded. "I'm sure you've heard rumors."

"Yes," she admitted. "He was a bit of a wastrel?"

A dry laugh boomed out of him. "He was a cad. He broke my mother's heart, and he died a pathetic man in a room by himself, ranting and raving and cursing us all."

Imogen wrapped her arms around him. "I'm sorry."

He didn't respond to her embrace, but simply kept talking as if he'd opened some floodgate that had been closed for far too many years. "He had women. Many, many women. He drank and gambled and took chances with his life. Finally, his luck ran out, and he slept with the wrong woman. It killed him."

"An angry husband?" she asked, having a suspicion of what had killed his father already but needing the clarification.

He gave a tight shake of his head. "Not a duel."

She didn't need to ask further. Almost certainly his father had caught the French disease. It wasn't necessary to make Duncan say it, and she'd heard how horrendous a death that was. Why, she knew there was the Lock Asylum, its entire purpose being to look after those gone mad and rotten from the sickness.

"Your mother?" she asked gently.

"He didn't pass it to her, thank God." His voice became hoarse. "She died of a broken heart, I think. The doctors said it was a weakness of the heart, but I truly believe it was sadness. She'd never thought her life would end like that, the pity of all society. When father came home, she never went back to London. I think she was afraid to face the *ton* and their knowing looks."

Duncan slowly lifted his arms and pulled her to him. "At the end. . ." His voice broke. "He wouldn't even let me near him. He screamed and screamed and

threw things at me as I stood helpless in the doorway.”

Imogen held Duncan with all the tenderness she could muster. How she wished she could take the hurt away. “How terrible for you.”

Duncan drew in a deep breath. “We were never close, but I had hoped for just one kind word at the end. His mind had gone, you see. We were never able to say good-bye.”

Everything made sense now. Of course Duncan ruled himself with an iron fist. The fear of slipping down the path of debauchery like his father would have been terrifying. It was also clear why he hadn’t wished to marry her. She danced too close to the flame of sin. It stunned her that he’d even come to the Earl of Albany’s scandalous abode. “Duncan, why are you here? It must be very painful. Surely such an event reminds you of your father’s behavior.”

He tensed. “Do you know what’s painful?”

She waited, wondering what could possibly be harder than the recollection of his father’s dark end.

“Losing you,” he said. “Because of my own stupidity and fear.”

Imogen bit her lower lip, not even trying to stop the tears from slipping down her cheeks. Finally, she drew in a breath. “Duncan, I might not make you happy. What if you change your mind? I’m not like a girl you’d marry in the first flush of her season. I haven’t been for years. I did that once. I was the wife who did as she was told by her husband. I can’t do that again.”

“I don’t want you to. I was an utter fool to say those things. I need *you*, Imogen. Not some miss who will bow to my moods when I try to slip back into my crusty old ways. I came to this place to show you that I love you just the way you are. I have no wish to change you. If you wish to dance at the Devil’s Dance, I will be here with you. If you wish to stay at home by the fire, I will sit beside you. I beg you to call me a grump when needed, to tell me when I scowl. You see, I need you to teach me how to enjoy life again. The only happiness I have known, since being a child, has been with you.”

Hope bloomed in her at that moment. It was more than hope, in all truth. This was what she had been waiting for since she first collided with him. She knew that now. It would be a chance. Duncan might be stuck in his ways, but she could see from the fervor in his gaze how deeply he meant what he said. Wasn’t all life a risk? Could she deny herself a chance at love and happiness just because she was afraid that Duncan might revert to his old ways? No. She couldn’t. She deserved a chance at love. He did, too.

Duncan stepped away and took her hands in his. Slowly, he lowered himself to one knee. "Marry me. Be my duchess."

"What kind of duchess?" she couldn't help asking. She had to make sure he understood that she could never go back to being a woman who didn't speak.

"Your kind of duchess, Imogen. One who is free and fills all that surrounds her with happiness."

"Then yes!" She pulled him back to his feet and stood on her tiptoes. "Kiss me, Duncan, then let's go home."

CHAPTER 22

*B*y home, Imogen later confided to Duncan, she had meant Scotland, but on the coach ride away from the Earl of Albany's, she'd realized they couldn't fly off to the border. There was too much in London that held her at present.

Duncan stretched on her bed, smiling. He hated his London residence. There were by far too many ill-favored memories. Here, in Imogen's room? He could stay for days. There was something remarkably soothing about the soft blue tones, the cool cream stuccoed walls, and the light frescoed ceiling. Everything about it seemed to suggest a woman who was content in this life. Now she was his. Well, almost. He was going to march her down the aisle as soon as possible. He wasn't taking any chances.

A marriage in Scotland would have been ideal, but he had every intention of purchasing a special license in a few hours' time.

He rolled over and drank in her soft scent still on the pillows. He was going to wake up and be surrounded by that fragrance until the day he died, and he couldn't imagine anything better.

Still, he wished she hadn't had to get up to perform some mysterious duty. It had been his intent to make love to her again and again as dawn slipped over the windowsill. He'd wasted far too much time those two months he'd let her go.

What a fool he'd been. The relief he felt was remarkable. It had never occurred to him how tightly he'd wound himself. How his perversion of duty had been a thing that caused him pain and prevented his happiness. All he'd tried to do in the pursuit of his duty was achieve a pain-free life for himself and his sister.

Moderation. Moderation was the key. Imogen enjoyed herself, but she'd never harmed anyone.

No, it had been he who had done the harm, because he'd swung too far in the opposite direction of his father's perversions.

He took a deep breath, grateful that he no longer had to live like that.

The high, demanding cry of an infant punctured his reverie.

Duncan's ears perked. He knew the Duchess of Darkwell was here with her babe. Of course there would be a baby crying. He pulled the blankets tighter. He

wouldn't be welcome in the nursery. So he'd have to stay.

The cry continued, growing even angrier.

Duncan glanced at the door.

He liked babies.

He had since the moment his sister had come into this world, bawling her little head off.

It had been some time since he'd been around one, but they were such funny little creatures, and frankly, the distressed cry struck a chord of anxiety deep within him. There was nothing for it. Duncan swung his legs over the side of the bed, hauled his clothes on, and headed toward the wailing.

He approached what had to be the nursery door and inched the door open. Kathryn holding her baby in her arms, Cordelia bouncing hers, and Imogen all stood in their nightgowns and robes, shushing lovingly but desperately.

Cordelia's baby was in a full fuss.

He looked around for signs of a wet nurse. The ladies were alone.

He cleared his throat.

Kathryn gasped, Cordelia didn't even look, and Imogen beamed at him.

"If either of the husbands finds you in here," Imogen said brightly, "you might be singing an octave higher come morning."

Duncan rolled his eyes. "I'll take my chances." He took a step forward and looked to the swaddled babe in Cordelia's arms. "May I?"

Cordy, who was holding the baby a bit tightly, looked completely out of her depth as she stared down at her child. "I don't know why he won't stop crying."

"You've no maid?" he asked.

Cordelia's brow furrowed. "I wished to try to look after him myself. I didn't realize I would be so bad at it."

"Och, Cordelia," he said. "You're a fine mother, but you just don't know a few things yet."

"And you do?" she challenged, her lip trembling.

Now, Duncan did know a few things about women who had just given birth. He could still remember the way his mother had been up and down after Ros had been born. He knew the fierce emotion rolling off the young duchess was absolutely normal given she'd just brought a child into the world. "When my sister was a wee thing like that, she had the worst wind."

Cordelia blinked. "Wind?"

"Yes," he said and held out his arms again. "May I?"

Cordelia stared at her baby again, but then she nodded. Very gently, she passed him the loudly fussing baby.

Duncan took the slight weight in his hands and immediately felt his heart slam in his chest. The wee thing was absolutely beautiful in his fuss, all red with his little face screwed up, doing what all babies did. Still, the little one was suffering, and Duncan swayed, lifted him, placed him on his big shoulder, then patted. After three good pats, he let out wind from both ends and immediately stopped crying.

The three women stared at him as if he had grown a second head.

“I was very fond of my little sister,” he said defensively. Truth be known, his little sister had been one of the only joyous events of his childhood. He’d spent hours in the nursery studying her delicate infant’s face. He’d also insisted on bouncing her around and changing her clothes. It had earned him a rage-filled discussion with his father about what dukes did and what dukes didn’t do.

Duncan was never going to worry about his father again. And as he stared at the baby in his arms, then glanced up to Imogen, he knew that the future was unfolding before him, and it had never looked more beautiful.



Imogen couldn’t believe what a turn her life had taken in just a few hours. This afternoon she’d faced a life alone, circling through parties and having missed out on love. Now, at dawn, everything had changed.

The Duke of Blackburn was gazing down at Cordelia’s infant as if he’d already fallen in love. He was gurgling strange words in a deep yet musical tone. This was what he would be like as a father. He wouldn’t be distant. He wouldn’t see the baby for five minutes once a day and send it back the nursery. Duncan Hamish Fergus would love his child and give it all the affection that he so clearly had never had.

Kathryn winked at her.

Cordelia went over to the two and was asking for suggestions about how to assist her son, to which Duncan replied in the same musical tones, as if he was still cooing at the baby.

His accent had deepened considerably in his happiness.

That’s what it had to be. He was free of the prison of his past, and happy, and so was she. It was impossible to imagine how life could get any better. . . Except. . . Perhaps the sure knowledge that one day she’d hold her own babe in

her arms. She smiled at Duncan as he rocked the baby as if he wasn't a giant of a man holding a tiny little thing just born into the world. There was time. All she had to do was wait.



Duncan came down Imogen's stairs and strolled into breakfast.

Two pairs of very English gazes stared.

"Good God, you've achieved coitus," Hunt declared.

Duncan snorted as he headed toward the food set out in silver servers. "No thanks to you, Your Grace."

Darkwell shifted uncomfortably on the beautifully carved walnut chair. "Do forgive us, old man. We did truly think we were assisting you. We like Imogen and want her to be happy."

"Indeed we do," agreed Hunt.

"You sent me off to kidnap her," he said as he plunked a spoonful of eggs on his china plate.

Hunt cleared his throat. "Yes. Well, about that. I've been instructed to apologize."

Duncan stopped. "You? Apologize?"

Hunt huffed. "My wife has made it rather clear that I will be in the coaching house if I don't make amends."

"She did suggest that your abduction of her didn't go off quite the way you claimed."

Hunt frowned and gulped some tea. "Damn it. It was exceptionally romantic. So what if there were a few kinks in the plan?"

Duncan sat at the table and began to eat voraciously. "Apology accepted."

"A truce then?" Darkwell said, lifting his cup of steaming coffee. "Between Scotland and England?"

Duncan grinned. "I suppose."

"Except for on Sundays!" a voice declared from the door.

Aston marched in. He looked a bit worse for wear, but that didn't stop him from spilling into a seat and pouring himself a cup of coffee.

Darkwell, Hunt, and Duncan let out a simultaneous groan.

Aston grinned. "I knew you'd be pleased to see me, indeed I did."

Duncan leaned back in his chair. "I'll be happier to see you at my wedding."

Aston choked on his coffee. "What?"

“Imogen is to be my wife, and you’re all invited. I’ll get a special license, but we’ll wait another few days so all the ladies can attend, and I’m sure my sister, Ros, will wait before she hies off to Italy. Lucky thing she’s in London.”

Aston pushed a spoon on the table. “Lucky. Very lucky. You know, I think I might have to be at sea.”

Duncan arched a brow. “At sea?”

“Yes. You know.” Aston slurped his coffee. “Urgent business and all that.”

“Are you quite all right?” Hunt asked.

Aston nodded vigorously. “Quite. Quite.”

“You must come,” Duncan said. “If it wasn’t for you, I would never have thought I might be wrong about Imogen and the poaching business.”

Aston groaned. “Why, oh, why didn’t I keep my big mouth shut?”

Duncan smirked. “Because you’re all heart, Aston.”

Aston gave a tremulous smile. “You say that now, but. . .”

“But?” Duncan repeated.

Aston shook his head, jumped up, and started piling toast on a plate. “Nothing. Nothing at all. Now, I do love weddings. I’ll bring the champagne. How about that?”

Duncan laughed. The Duke of Aston was such an odd fellow but a fine one. What a bizarre blessing that day in Scotland had been. If Aston hadn’t been such a rogue, Duncan would have introduced him to his sister. But never in a month of Sundays would he allow the Englishman to woo Ros. No, he’d go to the devil first.

CHAPTER 23

Imogen couldn't stop herself from trembling. It hardly seemed possible that she was married. Duncan had done the most outrageous thing. He'd claimed St. Paul's for the ceremony and then invited the entire *ton*. Without telling her. And they had all come, of course. A couple as immersed in the gossip mill, since that infamous morning, was too much fodder to be ignored, and, well, Duncan was a duke.

The bells that had pealed overhead had seemed to be a loud declaration of their love, a claim to all the world that no one could take their happiness away. The marriage of a duke was no small thing, and as she'd walked down the cathedral steps, her rose gown billowing about her, the crowd had cheered and waved their hats. The street had been packed with Londoners as they'd driven to the wedding breakfast. She felt a joy on this day that she'd never felt as a girl. This was better than any fairy tale.

Duncan took her hands in his and escorted her from the flower-bedecked coach to the gardens where, now that the weather was mild enough, a stunning alfresco celebration had been set up. "Happy?" he asked.

"Yes." She blushed. Oh, it wasn't a young girl's blush, but a blush of a woman who had never dared believe that life could go so well. As she walked into the throng of people already drinking copious amounts of wine, she could barely believe it was all for her. Flowers poured over white-linen-covered tables. Gazebos and arches were swathed in pink silk fabric and entwined with gold stars. The whole thing looked like a fairy bower. She didn't know how Duncan had managed it.

They stopped in front of a large stone fountain set right at the center of the garden behind Duncan's London home, and he raised his hands. The entire crowd of several hundred people turned in their direction.

Immediately, a footman appeared beside her and passed them two crystal flutes of champagne.

Duncan raised his glass and gazed down at her. "I give you the most beautiful woman in the world, my heart, my wife, the Duchess of Blackburn!"

The crowd charged their glasses and chanted back in one great, jolly exclamation, "The Duchess of Blackburn!"

Then, much to the delight and laughter of everyone, Duncan drew her close and pressed a soft kiss to her mouth.

"Peasantry!" declared the Duke of Roth as he strode forward and kissed Imogen on the cheek. He winked at Duncan. "To kiss one's wife in public? Not done, old man. Not done."

"You mightn't, but we Scots are more than pleased to show the world who their woman belongs to," Duncan said happily.

"Any luck with your lady problem?" Imogen asked.

Roth immediately soured. "No. Damned fool family."

Duncan wagged his brows. "Lady problems?"

Roth arched a dark brow and huffed, "Never you mind, Scotsman."

"I'd love to be of assistance," Duncan said. "After all, you were so tremendously helpful to me."

Roth had the good grace to look a trifle sheepish. "Well, I was hoping you'd come up to snuff, but drink got the better of me. Never should have pulled that bow and arrow on you."

"What?" exclaimed Imogen. She punched Roth on his green silk sleeve. "You did what?"

"He tried to murder me," Duncan supplied.

"Motivate you," corrected Roth. "I needed to see just how much you wanted her."

"God save me from men," Imogen sighed. They were all such a mystery. She didn't think she would ever entirely understand the dukes.

"Not all men, sweetheart," Duncan said softly.

"No." She grabbed hold of his lapel and leaned into him. "Not all."

"By the by, have you seen Aston?" Roth asked. "I saw him go after a redhead." He shook his head in dismay. "Redheads are the devil's own nuisance. He's bloody mad."

Duncan's eyes narrowed. "Watch yourself, mon. My sister's a redhead."

"Is she, by God?" Roth cleared his throat. "No insult meant. Redheads are all the rage these days, in any case."

Roth threw Imogen a mischievous glance.

She ignored it, hoping beyond hope that Roth was drawing the correct conclusion.

"Where is Ros?" Duncan asked.

Imogen smiled. She and his sister had gotten on smashingly, and as she peered about, she spotted Rosalind emerging from the hedges. She bit down on her lower lip to stifle a groan. She prayed that Ros was not the redhead to whom Roth was referring. Aston was a dear, but he'd be the worst fellow for a girl to fall in love with.

Ros pulled a leaf from her hair, then glanced about.

Imogen wrinkled her nose and turned Duncan in the other direction. She was not having his temper ignited today of all days. "I do believe she's over by the refreshments table."

"Ah. Good." Duncan nodded, pacified. "I hope Aston doesn't make a ponce of himself at this party."

"It would be a miracle if he did not," she sighed.

And as if to cue such a thing, Aston strode across the green, soaking wet.

Duncan eyed him up and down. "What happened to you?"

Aston winced, gave a quick glance toward Ros' direction, then gave a merry laugh. "Too much champagne, old man. I love a wedding, indeed I do. Fell into your pond."

Duncan shook his head, then clapped Aston on the shoulder. "Get inside and borrow some clothes, you great fool. And try not to drown on the way."

Aston nodded exaggeratedly, then headed off for the house.

Imogen wondered if there was going to be another wedding much sooner than any of them had anticipated. Anything did seem to be possible these days.

Duncan took her hand and led her toward the blossoming daffodils at the foot of the fountain. He plucked one and handed it to her. "New life?" he asked softly. "For us?"

She took the fresh flower and held it to her heart. "Yes, my love. And what a wonderful new life it is."

"You woke me from my pain, Imogen. You brought me to life. How can I ever thank you?"

"Love me," she said simply.

"Always," he replied. "Forever."

Imogen stood on tiptoe and threw herself into her duke's arms. Forever had never looked so marvelous.

EPILOGUE

Three Years Later

Imogen held her baby to her breast and stared in absolute wonder as the little boy suckled. He was three weeks old, healthy as the day was long, and absolutely loved to nurse. It hadn't been easy at first, and many *ton* mothers would have immediately hired a wet nurse, but this was something she had wanted for so long she was going to savor every moment. She studied the shell-shaped ear, the delicately closed eyes, and the soft lips working so diligently to drink. He was so content, so happy, as his little fist worked at her breast.

It had taken more than two years of waiting. That waiting had begun to hang like a dark cloud over her and Duncan's happiness. But, finally, the clouds had lifted, her belly had swelled daily, along with her fears, and then one day Andrew Angus Phillip Fergus, Earl of Blackmoor had been born. As if making up for all past pain, the labor had been quick, and her baby had thrived with great gusto.

Duncan sat in a chair beside the bed, dozing. He'd never left their side. Anything she needed, he organized with exceptional skill. So much skill that he had been there for everything.

She cuddled into the warm blankets and looked out the window, gazing at the loch. In just three weeks' time, their annual Christmas house party would take place.

The castle was changed. It had come alive like some cold, lonely place from a fairy story. Now, an invitation from the Duke and Duchess of Blackburn at Christmastime was one of the most sought-after invitations in all the isles. Duncan was a gregarious landlord, always chatting with his tenants, and she loved throwing fete after fete to entertain the people all around. Their lives were driven by long walks over the bens. It was a glorious existence.

Duncan blinked, stretched, then smiled at them. "How are the most important people in the world?"

"We're quite well. It's luncheon for Andrew," she teased.

"I do think it is always luncheon for Andrew," he said, pleased, as if his son's appetite was some reflection on himself.

“You know, we must choose godparents,” Imogen observed.

Duncan stood and climbed onto the bed beside her. “Who do you have in mind?”

She paused. “Aston would make an excellent godfather.”

“Don’t speak to me about that man. I am still plotting his death.”

Imogen fought a smile. She’d broach the subject again later. She knew her husband didn’t truly wish the man dead. Not in his heart. “How did we ever deserve such happiness?” she asked.

“We’ve worked for it, Imogen.” He kissed her cheek, then very gently touched the top of his son’s head. “We’ve stared in the face of pain and sadness and said, ‘No.’”

Imogen savored the warmth of her husband cradling her and their son. Life was a strange and merry thing, always twisting, always turning. As she gazed down at her son, she knew that life was a miracle and that she and Duncan had the greatest miracle of all.

Love. Always, love.

THE END

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THE ROGUE AND I

CHAPTER 1

1805

The Trent Estate

Miss Harriet Manning was not pleased at all. Which was quite odd because in general Harriet, or Harry to her friends, was the most amused and happy of people. But when one was faced with seeing the man, not gentleman mind you, that one had lost their virginity and stupid, stupid heart to five years ago, displeasure really did seem to be the only appropriate emotion.

At this very moment, bad sport that it made her, she hated her dearest cousin. The blasted girl *had* to go and marry her virginity stealer's brother. In no time, the whole confounded wedding party was going to arrive to romp in so called bliss at the coming nuptials.

Oh, and she positively loathed her usually marvelous uncle. How could she not? The cantankerous man had arranged for a week of fete to celebrate the advantageous marriage! A week. Seven days. One hundred and sixty eight agonizing hours in *his* presence, or fairly near to it anyway. The day time interactions would be impossible to avoid, but she had no intention of being within a mile's distance of his person when they all headed off for bed.

In fact, she very well might lock herself in and convince her cousin to rope her to her massive and immovable mahogany bed. It wasn't as if Emmaline didn't already think she was terribly odd.

Yes. Tying her to the bed might be quite necessary, because she didn't really trust herself not to march down the hall and sever that man's favorite appendage.

Or even more dangerous, make use of it. She couldn't quite forget how skilled he'd been, especially considering he'd been in the first flush of manhood. Oh, but the way he had stroked her—

“My, your skin is quite flushed.”

Harriet whipped around, her skirts whisking the perfect white and blue woven rug. Embarrassment burned her already horribly hot cheeks. Her past sins emphatically at the forefront her thoughts, looking her cousin in the eye was out of the question. Quickly, she cleared her throat, looking about the newly furnished French style salon, trying to focus on anything other than *him*. “Yes. Perhaps I should move away from the fire.”

Emmaline bobbed her blond curled head towards the ornately carved Carrera marble fire place and narrowed her perfect, pretty blue eyes. She tapped the bouquet of gardenia’s in her hand against her full pink India muslin skirts. “Dearest there isn’t any fire.”

A strained laugh rippled from Harry’s throat. “Of course. Of course there isn’t.”

Emmaline set her flowers down on the embroidered chair and eyed Harry dubiously. “Are you certain you’re quite alright? You look. . .” Her sand colored brows scrunched together in contemplation. “Well, I don’t know exactly, but you look like you’ve been caught doing something quite naughty.”

Harry pursed her lips. “When have I ever done anything naughty?”

Emmaline’s eyes widened and she glanced up towards the ceiling, clearing beginning to recall a very long list. “Well, there was the time—”

Harry held up her hand, already knowing that in truth Harriet and naughty were synonymous. “Please, if you begin we shall be here all day and into the night.”

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Also by Eva Devon